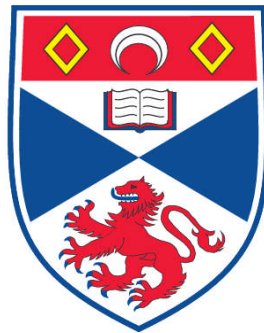


**SUBORDINATE BUT EQUAL:  
THE INTRA-TRINITARIAN SUBORDINATION OF THE SON TO  
THE FATHER IN THE THEOLOGIES OF P.T. FORSYTH AND  
JÜRGEN MOLTMANN**

**Matthew Lee Sanders**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St. Andrews**



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**Subordinate but Equal: The Intra-Trinitarian Subordination  
of the Son to the Father in the Theologies  
of P. T. Forsyth and Jürgen Moltmann**

by

Matthew Lee Sanders, B. A., M. A. Th.

**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of St. Mary's College of

The University of St. Andrews

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

The University of St. Andrews

25 August 2010

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I, Matthew Sanders, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in August 2002 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in May 2003; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2002 and 2010.

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*To Cheryl and  
our three daughters Kiyomi, Ariel, and Keiko*

Πάντα εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ ποιεῖτε

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began work on this dissertation, I decided that I would not sacrifice my relationship with my wife and children as a result. While this has meant that the process took longer than I might have otherwise wanted, I could not live with the contradiction of writing about Trinitarian love while isolating myself from those closest to me who I have been especially called to love this way. *Mahalo nui loa* to my wife, Cheryl, and three daughters, Kiyomi, Ariel, and Keiko. As I look at who we are today as a family, I am reminded daily that the path we chose has been long but well worth it. To make this possible, God has provided numerous other people who have provided support in myriad ways. I will name here only my late father and mother, Dr. William D. and Annie Bon Yon Lee Sanders and my mother-in-law, Pearl Toma, and late father-in-law, Ed Toma.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

*Wherefore, since we desire to understand the eternity, and equality, and unity of the Trinity, as much as is permitted us, but ought to believe before we understand; and since we must watch carefully, that our faith be not feigned; since we must have the fruition of the same Trinity, that we may live blessedly; but if we have believed anything false of it, our hope would be worthless, and our charity not pure: how then can we love, by believing, that Trinity which we do not know?*<sup>1</sup>

The words of Augustine summarize well the importance of knowing the Trinity as well as providing an approach to this task – everything that matters to Christians hinges on our knowledge of the Trinity. Faith precedes understanding, but faith must be faith in truth and not falsehood. Faith in a true understanding of the Trinity enables us to “live blessedly”, gives value to our hope, and keeps our love pure. Augustine’s concluding words, “... how then can we love, by believing, that Trinity which we do not know”, assert that faith, hope, and love, the very marks of being a Christian, are dependent upon our knowledge of the Trinity.

But as evidenced by church history, this search for the knowledge of the Trinity has been a difficult one. It is well known that a large part of the problem stems from developing language that not only accurately describes the Trinity, but also can be understood across time and cultures. As any history of the early church will include, during the Trinitarian controversies of the first four centuries, the keyword used to express Nicene orthodoxy, ὁμοούσιος, was misunderstood for decades in the West and much of the East as were other terms such as πρόσωπον and ὑποστάσις.

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 8.5.8. Unless otherwise noted, the works of the ante-Nicene fathers used in this study are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), electronic version Oak Harbor: Logos Research System, 1997. The works of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers are from *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) and Second Series, ed. Schaff and Henry Wace, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952-57), electronic versions Oak Harbor: Logos Research System, 1997.

“Subordination”<sup>2</sup> is one of those key terms in Trinitarian theology that is connected directly to other key theological terms such as divinity, lordship, authority, equality, freedom, community, and obedience. But even more importantly, this term is directly related to the relationship of the Father and the Son and thus is at the very heart of the Trinity. Alterations to this term will affect other important terms and ultimately affect the Christian understanding of God. This term has become a battlefield primarily among evangelical Christians in North America over the past 20 years who despite holding common views regarding sources of authorities for theology and biblical hermeneutics have almost diametrically opposed views on what this term means. Directly affected by and affecting this dispute is a biblical understanding of manhood and womanhood including the roles of men and women in the church and marriage. Interestingly, both sides have accused the other of revising the doctrine of the Trinity to support its views. While these matters have great significance for these groups, even more important is whether the view of God of either side is so at odds with the God revealed in Scripture that it is not a faithful view of the one true God at all and thus both heretical and dangerous to use as a model for human relationships.

This study will begin by surveying how “subordination” has been understood in Scripture and during the formative years of the doctrine of the Trinity up until Augustine. Most of the major theologians from this time believed that the Son was at least in some sense deity, and the purpose of the survey will be to see what, if any, understanding of subordination was used by these, how it might have been qualified, and whether some sense of it emerged from this process. An attempt will be made to see how faithful to the scriptural witness the resulting view was. The survey stops at Augustine largely because the views that will dominate in the East and West had been developed at this point and little, if any,

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<sup>2</sup> The use of “subordination” instead of “subordinationism” at this point is because the former is the more general term and may include the latter and the latter has been used specifically to refer to the heresy of ontological subordination.



development in the understanding of subordination occurs until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> From this baseline, the study will look at the theologies of two more contemporary theologians, P. T. Forsyth and Jürgen Moltmann, to evaluate the consistency of their understanding of subordination with Scripture and the orthodox position. The concluding chapter will attempt to see what, if any, contributions the understanding of subordination by these two theologians as well as the patristics and Scripture might make to contemporary theological discussions, including the current discussion among evangelicals.

Before proceeding, the rest of this chapter will detail further the rationale for this study and recent events that influence the current situation. In order to further establish the need for understanding subordination, this study will elaborate more on the risks involved in doing Trinitarian theology especially with regards to the relevancy of the doctrine, provide an overview of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century resurgence of interest in the doctrine to see where the discussion is today, and look specifically at the term “subordination” and how it is being used and is influencing the contemporary situation.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE AND RISK OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY**

As Augustine stated in the above quote, to love the God who is Trinity we must know the God who is Trinity. But the continuing significance of Trinitarian theology also hinges on the validity of a presupposition that most Christian theologians have held in some form or another regarding the direct connection between who God is and who we are and the relevance that connection has as to how we are to live. In laying out the central theme of his book, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Colin Gunton expresses that thought:

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that subordinationism controversies did not recur, only that the church’s understanding of heretical subordinationism, i.e., ontological subordination, is established with subsequent writers defending or affirming the orthodox or heretical positions without developing new arguments that affect the current study. In addition, Moltmann and Forsyth interact with patristic writers in this era. In particular, Moltmann builds much of his theology in response to Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers. Forsyth draws from Athanasius.

The centre is to be found in a quest, for ontology, in something like a traditional sense, for I believe that it is only through an understanding of the kind of being that God is that we can come to learn what kind of beings we are and what kind of world we inhabit.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian doctrine behind Gunton's statement is in part the *Imago Dei*, which logically leads to the conclusion that knowledge of God helps us not only love him better, but to know and love ourselves and each other better. This is a powerful incentive to know God more, but as church history has shown, it can also lead to the over-identification of God with creation leading to a deification of humanity, creation, or history, an anthropomorphizing of God, or a projecting of human ideals onto God. The scriptural distinction between Creator-created can be blurred.

"God reveals Himself as Lord", Karl Barth reminds us in his introduction to his doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> But God the Revealer is simultaneously transcendent ("holy" to use the biblical term), beyond comparison to creation or anything created (e.g., Is. 40:18), and, at least in a physical sense, beyond being directly encountered by creation (e.g., Ex. 33:20, Jdg. 6:23). This obviously makes the theological task more difficult because one cannot simply look at what has been revealed and assume that is all there is to God. There is the need to speak where God has been silent, but this necessity can lead to the danger of developing a false conception of God, which as Augustine had warned above leads to the unraveling of all that it means to be Christian.

## A CENTURY OF TRINITARIAN REVIVAL

The past century of resurgence of activity in Trinitarian theology has demonstrated both the significance and the risks of the doctrine. In a sort of cost-benefit analysis, the following questions could be asked: (1) Have the recent Trinitarian theological developments

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<sup>4</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, (New York: T&T Clark, 1997), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1 of *Church Dogmatics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. G. W. Bromiley, and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 295.

enhanced our understanding of God or moved us toward a different conception of God and thus a different God? (2) Have these developments resulted at minimum in increased opportunities for unity among Christians or have they simply revealed fractures that have long been there and perhaps even exacerbated them? and (3) Has the doctrine “made it to the pews” in a relevant way or is it still simply for the vast majority of the church an enigmatic sign of orthodoxy?<sup>6</sup> To combine these questions, one might ask has the renewed interest in Trinitarian theology resulted in a more Trinitarian church or a more Trinitarian world? These questions are outside the scope of the current study, but they imply an issue that is relevant regarding whether people with differing, even opposing presuppositions can find a common understanding of the Trinity or will the doctrine of the Trinity at least in part be shaped by presuppositions? This shaping is an even greater possibility for the doctrine of the Trinity, which is shrouded in mystery yet points to important truths such as equality, love, and freedom that can be redefined with varying reliance on their doctrinal context. The next section will look back over the past 100 years to help determine what has been learned and what might be next.

### **100 Years of Trinitarian Theology**

Despite the best efforts by some Enlightenment thinkers and theologians to bury the Trinity with labels of irrelevancy and impracticality, the doctrine of the Trinity returned to prominence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today for many theologians is the source and identity of the true Christian vision for creation. Even before Immanuel Kant’s assertion that the “doctrine of the Trinity provides nothing, absolutely nothing, of practical value”,<sup>7</sup> the church had long suspected as much worshipping God as Trinity and affirming the orthodoxy of the

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<sup>6</sup> This was one of the chief concerns of the British Council of Churches. (British Council of Churches, *The Forgotten Trinity: The Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today*, [London: British Council of Churches, 1989], 4).

<sup>7</sup> Leonardo Boff quoting from Kant’s *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns, [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1997], 19).

doctrine but finding more practical value in a monotheism or even tritheism in Trinitarian language. Although the church defended the orthodoxy of the doctrine of the Trinity, none offered a rebuttal to Kant's statement regarding its practical value. The doctrine of the Trinity had primarily doxological value and was a test of orthodoxy that required only assent and not understanding. Without an understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, the transcendence of God overpowers his immanence and the divinity of the Son obscures his humanity, who then becomes virtually indistinguishable from the Father. This distant individualistic view of God becomes the ground for people's alienation from God and from each other and for the transfer of divine predicates to humanity.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a shift began to take place in the theology of some Christian theologians who saw that the over-identification of humanity as divine was premature, if not completely erroneous, and that Christianity itself, especially the Protestant liberal strain of it, was at risk of becoming irrelevant because its theology was inadequate to address the world. For example, P. T. Forsyth as early as the 1890s was declaring the inadequacy of the liberal theology that he had at one time believed and defended. The clouds were gathering for the greatest storm the world would ever face, and he knew the church was ill-prepared to weather it, much less fight it or help others through it. As the realities of the deadliest century in human history began to unfold, others, such as Barth, also began to come to similar conclusions and joined the attempts to provide a theology that accepted the advancements made in the Enlightenment's critique of theology and rejected its errors.

This shift included a renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity and the role it might play in theology.<sup>9</sup> Barth placed the doctrine of the Trinity at the center of his

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<sup>8</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 153.

<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest calls for a re-examination of the doctrine of the Trinity was by Reinhold Seeberg. (Duncan Reid, *Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodox and Western Theology*, American Academy Religion Academy Series, ed. Barbara A. Holdredge, [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997], 24).

systematic theology and took a revelational, rather than philosophical, approach to it.<sup>10</sup>

Eastern theologian Vladimir Lossky emphasized the apophatic character of the doctrine placing the emphasis not on solving the divine riddle, but on accepting it in faith and contemplating it for further enlightenment and the ability to participate in the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner based his Trinitarian theology in salvation history with his axiom: “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”<sup>12</sup> A definite move was made away from the focus on the unity of God identified as an absolute substance or subject, which had prevailed in the West since Augustine, to a more relational view of the Trinity.

From the 1970s forward, interest in Trinitarian theology increased even more so in part because of the work of Jürgen Moltmann and others and their development of a social understanding of the Trinity that they saw as originating with the Cappadocian Fathers. A social doctrine of the Trinity has the strengths of (1) explaining the diversity and unity of the Trinity without relying on or denying the metaphysical understanding of the Trinity; (2) beginning with the historical revelation of the Trinity in the work of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament; and (3) providing a direct analogy of unity that could resolve the problems of oppression and alienation that plague the world.<sup>13</sup> Major concerns raised by critics of the social Trinity include (1) the importing of modern ideas into Trinitarian terms developed centuries ago<sup>14</sup> and (2) the emphasis on the threeness that prevents true

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, (London: James Clarke & Co., 1957), 64.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 22, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas R. Thompson and Cornelius Plantinga have a similar position. (“Trinity and Kenosis”, in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, ed. C. Stephen Evans, [Oxford: Oxford, 2006], 174)

<sup>14</sup> See Sarah Coakley’s article on the use of Gregory of Nyssa’s writings to support an understanding of “person” by proponents of the social doctrine of the Trinity. (“‘Persons’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity: A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion”, in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, [Oxford: Oxford, 1999], 123-144.)

monotheism and could in fact be tritheism.<sup>15</sup> Other concerns have not necessarily been with the doctrine itself as much as with the use of human experience to redefine or reinterpret the doctrine of the Trinity.

As a result, in the span of about a century, the doctrine of the Trinity has emerged from its near death experience to be at the center of healthy theological debates that raise important questions regarding orthodoxy, the authority of Scripture, and the hope of Christianity. The very question of what Christian theology is comes to the fore in these debates.<sup>16</sup> How far can Christian theology stray from the language of Scripture and tradition, for example in efforts to rename God? Is theology Christian as long as it conforms to the general Christian message or vision regardless of what words and sources of authority are used? To what extent should current experience and the current world situation re-contextualize or even redefine Christian theology? To what extent should Christian theology go to remain relevant in an ever-changing world? Should the doctrine of the Trinity replace or be placed alongside the atonement as the center of Christianity?

### **Contributions and Consequences from the Century of the Trinity**

What has a century of revival in Trinitarian theology brought? For one thing at least on the academic level, it has helped bring into conversation different parts of the church including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant churches. Secondly, there has been a de-emphasis on a substance ontology. In his review of Trinitarian theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Stanley Grenz said theology in the century has moved to a relational view of God and an increased focus on the Trinity in the economy often to the exclusion of the immanent

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<sup>15</sup> See Brian Leftow, “Anti Social Trinitarianism” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, (Oxford: Oxford, 1999), 208. Leftow categorizes social Trinitarians in three groups: Trinity monotheism, group mind monotheism, and functional monotheism. All three, he argues, fail to be true monotheism.

<sup>16</sup> Grenz also makes this point that the movement today is toward studying how Trinitarian theology helps us understand other doctrine. (Grenz, 3).

Trinity.<sup>17</sup> The former is especially significant in connecting theology and anthropology, because being relational is common to God and man and the practicality of the doctrine can be more readily seen. While not every Christian theologian today is a social Trinitarian, it seems all to some extent emphasize the significance in seeing God as relational. This is an important step forward and one which could provide a common base from which greater unity in the understanding of the doctrine can be developed.

The century has opened up the possibility that although there is only one Trinity several conceptual possibilities have been shaped that communicate truth about this one Trinity. While the basic understanding of the Triune God as seen in the revelation is eternal truth, it is still an understanding of the infinite God and therefore the doctrine can never in a full sense be static. One can find truth (as well as non-truth) in the psychological and social analogies of the Trinity and neither need be rejected completely, because perhaps the only way to talk about the mystery of the Trinity is to talk in multiple ways simultaneously. But a variety of interpretations does not mean all are equal and keeps at the fore questions regarding the appropriate authoritative sources for Christian theology.

This points to problems that have been revealed in the Trinitarian revival. For example, not all sections of the church have had an equal voice in the discussions. Even though Free Churches are the fastest growing churches in the world,<sup>18</sup> the Free Church perspective is not always brought into studies and discussions on Trinitarian theology, even less so are those who might take an inerrant view of the Bible whether fundamentalists or

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<sup>17</sup> Grenz, 5. Grenz also notes a late 20<sup>th</sup> century resurgence in emphasis on the doctrine of the immanent Trinity and summarizes the works of Elizabeth Johnson, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, and T. F. Torrance as examples.

<sup>18</sup> In a 2001 American Religious Identification (ARIS) survey, Assemblies of God churches in the United States had experienced a 68% growth rate in the previous decade and other Pentecostal/Charismatic churches 38% growth rate. Also in the United States in a combined ARIS and Barna poll, more than 20% of American Christians identify themselves as Baptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Foursquare, or Assemblies of God. (Preston Hunter, "Largest Denominations/Denominational Families in U. S.", [http://www.adherents.com/reel\\_USA.html#families](http://www.adherents.com/reel_USA.html#families), accessed 29 Sept. 2009) The United Kingdom is experiencing similar trends. (WhyChurch, "Do Any UK Denominations Grow?", <http://www.whychurch.org.uk/denomination.php>, accessed 29 Sept. 2009)

not.<sup>19</sup> Noting the growth and commitment of evangelicals who are already the largest and most active Christians in North America, Mark Knoll also sees a lack of “intellectual influence” by this group in part because of a pragmatic emphasis on spreading the influence of Christianity by gaining conversions through very active evangelism efforts.<sup>20</sup> Intellectual influence might be important to this diverse group as a whole, but it is not the priority unless it serves the higher purpose of evangelism. In addition, the dominant voices in Trinitarian theological discussions have largely been in the West even though the majority of Christians now decidedly live in Africa, South America, and Asia, many in Third World countries.<sup>21</sup> When the largest, fastest growing groups in terms of theology and geography are excluded or exclude themselves from the discussion, the situation certainly does not seem to reflect a Trinitarian spirit unless one or more sides are clearly apostate or heretical or in some other way unworthy to be in the conversation. Added to this again is the conviction of Christian theology that there is only one God and so how varied can interpretations of this one God be if they are all to refer to the true God and not false ones?

In the patristic age, there was a general agreement regarding the rule of faith and the majority of the New Testament canon. Although hermeneutics ranged along a spectrum from literal to allegorical, the church agreed that these Scriptures were the inspired Word of God and the purpose of exegesis, regardless of method, was to determine the truth contained in these writings. Even the Arians sought truth in the Scriptures. The difference though was in their insufficient soteriology and presupposition of strict monotheism imported into their theology. The key question in the Arian controversy was what kind of God would produce

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<sup>19</sup> Two exceptions are Miroslav Volf and Millard Erickson, who both have contributed at least one major work on Trinitarian theology. Volf in his work notes the spread of Free Churches and Free Church elements in traditional Protestant and Catholic churches. (Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 12-13)

<sup>20</sup> Mark Knoll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 8, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Grenz notes the increased globalization of the Trinitarian theological discussion as well as efforts to recover overlooked theologians from the past. (Grenz, 2) See also data from Peter Brierley, *Religious Trends 5*, Swindon: Christian Research, 2005, <http://www.whychurch.org.uk/worldwide.php>, accessed 29 Sept. 2009.



this kind of salvation?<sup>22</sup> Athanasius understood that Scripture taught that Jesus came to bring divine life and only the divine could give the divine. As Frances Young expressed it, “The vital principle (for Athanasius) was that only God could save, because only God could restore and guarantee the presence of his image in man.”<sup>23</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the Arians could not read Scripture this way because their soteriology and theology did not allow it. Salvation for Arians was in emulating the example of the Son, which means the humanity of Christ was much more important than his divinity. In fact, a fully divine Son would work against Arian soteriology, because it would be impossible for humanity to follow Christ’s example.

This raises questions that often go unasked. Are there Arians yet among us? This is not necessarily meant in the sense of ontological subordinationism, but in any sense where a different god, even a different Trinity has been created because of a flawed soteriology or the importation of inappropriate presuppositions. What is the role of Scripture in theology? Can someone who believes in the inerrancy of Scripture develop an understanding of the Trinity that is anything like the understanding from someone who sees Scripture more as a source book of ideas? The Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (OCRT), a group that describes its purpose as promoting religious tolerance, noted on its Website how Protestant conservatives in North America were using words that had vastly different meaning from how other Christians were using them. The group concluded, “As a result meaningful dialogue between conservative Protestants and others has become almost impossible”.<sup>24</sup> A

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<sup>22</sup> The prevailing view up until recent years has been that the Arians were concerned primarily with cosmology, but as R. P. C. Hanson points out, affirming the works of Robert C. Gregg and Dennis Groh and R. D. Williams, it seems clear now that the Arians were very much interested in soteriology. (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*, [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1988], 95)

<sup>23</sup> Frances M. Young, “A Reconsideration of Alexandrian Christology”, in *Doctrines of God and Christ in the Early Church* vol. 9, ed, Everett Ferguson, *Studies in Early Christianity*, ed. Ferguson, David M. Scholer, and Paul Corby Finney, (New York: Garland, 1993), 166.

<sup>24</sup> Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, “A Dictionary Comparing Definitions Used by Evangelical Christians & Others”, [http://www.religioustolerance.org/evan\\_dic.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/evan_dic.htm), accessed 19 Sept. 2009. Separating Protestant conservative uses from “all others” is problematic and an over-generalization. Although the group’s conclusion at least in part seem valid, the implication of blame primarily on conservatives is not.

look at the group's charts comparing conservative use with others reveals divergent worldviews and epistemologies with at least conservatives and OCRT.<sup>25</sup>

Another example is feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, who sees traditional Christian language, including at least part of the Bible, as exclusive speech that supports "an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women".<sup>26</sup> She does not reject Scripture outright provided that the sense of it "means the promise of God's creative, compassionate, liberating care bent on the whole world, including women in all our historicity and difference."<sup>27</sup> Regarding the supremacy of women's experience over Scripture in her theology, Johnson writes of a feminist hermeneutic that "lifts off from imprisoning discourse and flies around the Scriptures seeking what has been lost ...".<sup>28</sup> If someone has a higher view of Scripture than this, what kind of agreement or even productive dialogue can he or she have with Johnson?

Even if there can be some agreement, what has been gained if one wants to apply this understanding in the context of Scripture while the other wishes to recontextualize the doctrine according to experience?<sup>29</sup> If either side views the doctrine of the Trinity as some theological buffet from which they can choose what suits their appetite, what benefit is the doctrine that is defined by and dependent on its unity? In this situation, the doctrine of the Trinity will simply reveal the differences that are there and not provide reconciliation or unity. Just like the situation Paul confronted in 1 Corinthians, what God had provided to

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<sup>25</sup> For example, one entry was the term "Christian" used by conservatives to mean "a person who has trusted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior and has been born again" and by "many others" to mean "a person who seriously, thoughtfully considers themselves (*sic*) to follow Christ's teachings". (ORTC, [http://www.religioustolerance.org/evan\\_dic4.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/evan_dic4.htm)) The soteriology of the former is much more tied to the deity of the Christ than the soteriology of the latter, which could be followed without belief in the deity or the humanity of the Son.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Liberation theology could also have been used as an example of a highly contextualized theology that admittedly interprets Scripture and orthodoxy through the experience of an oppressed group. See for example Leonardo Boff's statement that "Trinity lives in [human history] . . . giving heart to the struggle, power to resist, skill to create and the will to be free of everything that threatens these shoots of new life." (Boff, 225).

create unity is perverted to create disunity. It seems for the doctrine of the Trinity to unite rather than divide that there must be some agreement on epistemology and soteriology or else the revival will simply result in the creation of Trinities *ad infinitum*.<sup>30</sup>

Since the resurgence, one cannot simply look to the creeds or the “orthodox” theologians as the standard. As William Rusch notes, the ambiguity of the Nicene Creed with regards to the meaning of ὁμοούσιος might well have been its strength in accomplishing Constantine’s aim of unity in the church.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, there was ambiguity in the creed (and perhaps political motivation), which caused problems then and continues to do so today. For at least the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Moltmann and many others in the West criticized the Trinitarian theologies of Augustine and Aquinas for over-emphasizing the oneness of God and instead appealed to the Cappadocians and their appeal to the threeness of God. But there has been a response by those who defend the Augustinian position and question whether the modern interpretations of the Cappadocians are correct.<sup>32</sup>

The revival of the Trinitarian theology has come but has it come too late? With the post-modern reign of relativism and skepticism of all sources of authority, how can Trinitarianism be anything more than another of the possible leaps to the irrational that hopeless man can make or a theological clay that can be molded into whatever one wants it to be? If the regained relevancy of the doctrine is simply to be one of many and not the one True, what has been gained for a doctrine that is claimed to be the revelation of the one true God and will it not eventually be marginalized by theologies that are not so enigmatic?

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<sup>30</sup> David Cunningham noted in 1998 that the Trinity could become obscured by an overabundance of theologians. (*These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, [Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998], 19) (Cited by Grenz, 1). Mary Aquin O’Neill, in an otherwise positive review of Johnson’s book, says Johnson risks “conjuring up a new God”. (Review of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Religious Studies Review* 21, no. 1 [January 1995] : 21).

<sup>31</sup> William B. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans. and ed. Rusch, *Sources of Early Christian Thought*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 20.

<sup>32</sup> See for example several of the articles in the aforementioned *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*. These include articles on the Cappadocian understanding of οὐσία and ὑποστάσις, a rereading of Augustine’s Trinitarian theology, a defense of the use of substance in Trinitarian theology, and critique of social Trinitarianism.

Trevor Hart suggests that Barth's theology might offer an approach that will allow the doctrine of the Trinity to play a vital role in a pluralistic world. Using Lesslie Newbigin's distinction between "agnostic pluralism" and "committed pluralism", Hart sees Barth as being not only dogmatic in his belief that the Trinity is the Christian God and the Christian God is the only God, but also equally convinced that only Christians by God's grace can perceive this revealed truth. The response by Christians should not be arrogance, but humility that God would be so gracious to them and commitment to a mission to help others see what they see.<sup>33</sup> If Barth (at least how Hart has interpreted him) is correct here, the doctrine of the Trinity is the motivation and result of the Christian witness and it means Christians must have great compassion for those who cannot see what God has not yet enabled them to see. It is, therefore, more important than ever to know the Trinity.

Everything then returns to the revelation. In addition to emphasizing the relationality of God, the resurgence in Trinitarian theology has brought greater emphasis to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and reaffirmed the significance of belief that only God can reveal God. The Son must be God, because he is revealing God in his being, not just pointing him out of a crowd or communicating facts about him. Likewise the Spirit must be God, because he is revealing God within and through believers and the community of faith. This need for continuity with the revelation of Jesus Christ is critical, and as the revelation is understood in different contexts, retaining the meaning of key words, whether the words themselves are retained, is paramount.

### **Divine and Human Relations**

Much of the move to a more relational view of the Trinity is also a move toward a more practical relevancy of Trinitarian theology, a direct refutation of Kant's assertion.

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<sup>33</sup> Trevor Hart, "Karl Barth, the Trinity, and Pluralism", in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 140-141.

Emphasis on God as a metaphysical substance focuses on his otherness and makes it difficult to see how God's ontology can inform human ontology. Emphasis on a relational view of God in which Three Persons exist as one God in a divine community at minimum suggests parallels with human beings who are created as persons and intended for relationship. Although comparisons of divine and human relationships are evident, is such a comparison warranted in Scripture and if so, are there any limits to it?

As cited earlier, Gunton sees that understanding who God is informs our understanding of ourselves. Support for this position has been found in the *Imago Dei*, which Barth and others since him have understood relationally. Barth argued from Genesis 1:26-27 that the analogy between God and man is not one of being, but of relation, the I-Thou confrontation.<sup>34</sup> This is a departure from earlier interpretations of the *Imago Dei* that identified it in spiritual or ontological terms. Although Barth's exegesis and thus his position has been criticized for ignoring the context of the Genesis passage,<sup>35</sup> a relational view of the *Imago Dei* has persisted.<sup>36</sup>

The validity of an analogy between divine and human relationships, however, is based on more than the *Imago Dei*. In John 17:21, Jesus prays that his followers would experience the same unity as he has with his Father and describes that oneness as mutual indwelling. Jesus, himself, is making a direct connection between divine and redeemed human relationships.<sup>37</sup> In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul compares husband-wife relations with the relationship of Christ to the Father. In addition, the New Testament exhorts believers to be imitators of God (Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; Eph. 4:24). If God has revealed himself as Father,

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 49-50. Hoekema references Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 203, in which Barth states that the I-Thou relationship is constitutive for God and man.

<sup>35</sup> K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, Vol. 1a, *The New American Commentary*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), (electronic edition, Logos Library System), 166.

<sup>36</sup> Hoekema incorporates Barth's relational understanding into a view that takes into account the larger context of Genesis 1. (96-100) He also describes Emil Brunner's relational view that he views as more Scriptural than Barth's. (52-58)

<sup>37</sup> This passage will be examined further later in this study.

Son, and Spirit and he is seen in Scripture in his relationship to humanity, it would seem that we must in some way be able to “imitate” this and experience the oneness for which Jesus prayed. Otherwise, the revelation would be pointless and Kant would indeed be correct.

While there appears to be sufficient theological and Scriptural warrant for viewing intra-Trinitarian relations as paradigmatic for human relations, one must avoid simplistically importing into human relations anything that is seen in divine relations. One cannot disregard that humanity is not God and never will be. For example, the perichoretic relationship cannot be experienced in the same way because God is spirit and human beings are not. Human beings cannot mutually indwell one another in the way that Father, Son, and Spirit do and so this oneness will be experienced in a uniquely human way.<sup>38</sup> In addition to being corporeal, humanity is also either fallen or in the process of sanctification, which means much of what is seen in divine relations is something for which we should strive although we will not experience it in a full, permanent sense in this life.<sup>39</sup> It would seem then that divine-human parallels are there, but they should be drawn cautiously with careful study of Scripture.

One other important factor comes from Richard Bauckham, who in a critique of Moltmann’s *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, states that there is no biblical basis for viewing the Trinity as a model for human life.<sup>40</sup> With regards to what has been presented in this section, this appears to be an overstatement by Bauckham. However, he is correct when he affirms the Scriptural teaching on the indwelling Spirit. “It means that true human community comes about not as an image of the Trinitarian fellowship, but as the Spirit makes us like Jesus in his community with the Father and with others.”<sup>41</sup> While this does not preclude human community from being an image of divine community, it does point out that the process is

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<sup>38</sup> This does, however, point toward the unifying role of the indwelling Spirit in the lives of believers.

<sup>39</sup> In Eph. 5:1-2, believers are commanded to love unconditionally, completely selfless, and sacrificially. It hardly seems possible that anyone can do this for a prolonged period, yet it is what Christians are to aspire to be.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Jürgen Moltmann and the question of pluralism”, *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 160.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

not human emulation of the *Imago Dei*, whatever it might be, but the Spirit transforming us into the image of the Son. Boff seems to understand this at some level in advising theologians to resist constructing social models, but to instead see democracy as the underlying principle in all community.<sup>42</sup> This might also be seen in Gregory of Nyssa, who according to Sarah Coakley, emphasized divine communion, not divine community.<sup>43</sup>

## STUDY OF SUBORDINATION

This study will focus on the term “subordination” to see how this word might have informed and/or misinformed Trinitarian theology and whether it should be left behind, qualified, or replaced by a term that might better communicate without misleading. In particular, this term will be examined with respect to how it can be used with regards to the intra-Trinitarian relationship of the Son to the Father.

### Ontological Subordination

Throughout church history, ontological subordination of the Son to the Father has been rejected by the church whether the teaching came from Gnostic influences, Arianism, or any of a number of other individuals and groups that have taught a lesser nature for the Son. Even smaller Christian groups have recognized this as heretical, for example the 17<sup>th</sup>-century General Baptists in England who split over the Socinian teachings of Matthew Caffyn. The Caffyn example demonstrates how attractive and divisive this teaching can be among people who might in every other way appear orthodox.<sup>44</sup> A more modern example would be the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), which teaches that Jesus was created and became God through obedience. This is significant because in just over 170 years the LDS at more than 13 million members is among the fastest growing religions in the world and wants

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<sup>42</sup> Boff, 152.

<sup>43</sup> Coakley, 132.

<sup>44</sup> H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, (Broadman: Nashville, 1987), 156-157.

to be considered Christian (ostensibly to be one of many and not the only) despite the original claim of founder Joseph Smith that God told him to restore the true church and that all other churches were wrong and their creeds an abomination.<sup>45</sup> The reasoning the group uses to be considered Christian with few exceptions would include all groups that have claimed to be Christian regardless of their doctrine.<sup>46</sup>

Historical criticism of Scripture and Jesus at minimum creates the conditions for ontological subordinationism. While directly related to biblical studies, it is not without eventual effect on theology and might even be driven by theological presuppositions. Once the historical Jesus is separated from the Christ of faith, the implications seem to be that followers of Christ should first follow the “real” Jesus and only secondarily if at all follow the Christ of faith. This is not the case with all who accept the historical critic method as many find the Christ of faith as “real” as the historic Jesus, but it does encourage thinking in this direction. In addition, to begin with an anti-supernatural presupposition would preclude any divine intervention in history, especially in the sense of the incarnation.

Ontological subordination of the Son is also seen in other religions such as Islam. “Verily, Jesus is as Adam in the sight of Allah. He created him out of dust, He then said to him, Be—and he was.” (Quran 3:58-59) While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine Islamic subordinationist Christology, it is relevant in considering how much unity can be established between the two largest world religions that not only disagree over who Jesus is

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph Smith, *Pearl of Great Price*, 1:19. Compare also *Doctrine and Covenants*, 1:30.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Stephen E. Robinson argues that anyone who accepts Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God and the Savior of the world is a Christian regardless of what those words mean. The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and the full deity of the Son are portrayed as a narrow, special definition that unfairly and unnecessarily excludes the LDS. (“Are Mormons Christians?”, *New Era*, May 1998, 41, [http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vnextoid=024644f8f206c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=e0710e2cbc3fb010VgnVCM1000004d82620a\\_\\_\\_\\_&hideNav=1](http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vnextoid=024644f8f206c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=e0710e2cbc3fb010VgnVCM1000004d82620a____&hideNav=1), accessed 24 Nov. 2009). It should be noted that while many LDS members might be sincere in their desire to be included by and inclusive of other Christians, comments by some of their leaders past and present seem to indicate otherwise. In 1998, LDS President Hinckley claimed to be a follower of Christ but not of the “traditional Christ”, but the one who appeared with His Father to Joseph Smith. These comments give the impression that Hinckley wants to be included but not inclusive. (“Crown of Gospel is upon Our Heads”, *Church News*, June 20, 1998, <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/31188/Crown-of-gospel-is-upon-our-heads.html>, accessed 1 Nov. 2009)



but also consider the opposing view an abomination against God. Can two faiths coexist peacefully if both believe the other has blasphemed the one true God?

Many of those who ontologically subordinate the Son to the Father do so with the intent of defending the one God from sharing his sovereignty, but inadvertently elevate humanity and thereby reduce God's sovereignty. If the Son is a created being, he can at best be a teacher or example to be followed. There is no real sense of the impartation of the divine life or the Holy Spirit, and man is left on his own to learn and to try to pattern his life after Christ. Man is largely responsible for his salvation, because ultimately he will earn it if he continues to work toward being Christlike. There is little room for grace. As Arius and his followers showed, a faulty soteriology leads to a faulty theology and a faulty soteriology is based on a faulty theology.<sup>47</sup>

### **Obedience and ontological subordination**

While Nicaea might have established the foundation for the orthodox position regarding the ontological equality of the Father and Son, very little was sorted as to what belonged to the divine nature and what did not. It seems clear that substance and eternity were considered ontological, but begetting and begotten were not. Nicaea is affirming the long held distinction between Creator and created and placing the Son and the Spirit on the side of Creator. In the simplest terms, whatever makes the Father God also makes the Son God. All else is particular to the Person and not determinant of ontology. But this distinction gives very little indication as to what from Scripture should be predicated of the essence of God and what should be predicated of the Person.

With regards to the Son, the situation is further complicated because of the incarnation. Some sorting seems quite obvious. "I thirst" (Jn. 19:28) is clearly related to the

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<sup>47</sup> Young makes a similar point stating that Arianism directly promotes a man-centered soteriology. (166)

humanity of Jesus, but “He wept” (Jn. 11:35) is not so clear. While only the man Jesus physically shed tears, is this an expression of true sorrow from the God-man and if so can only the Son and Spirit (Eph. 4:30) grieve or can the Father also do so? More directly related to the subject at hand are obedience and humility. The Scriptures clearly attest to the obedience of the Son. Can this obedience simply be attributed to his humanity or his divinity? And if it is related to his divinity, is he obedient only in the economy or is he eternally obedient? If he is eternally obedient, is this assigned to his Person or is it ontological and if being ontological does this mean that the Son is not fully divine or that in some way the Father is also obedient (and to whom)? The *communicatio idiomatum* is no help here, because Scripture indicates that the Son’s obedience precedes the incarnation and must at minimum be economic.<sup>48</sup> If obedience is indeed predicated only of Jesus’ humanity, what implications does that have for God’s sovereignty and freedom?

In recent years there has been movement toward identifying Christ’s obedience to the Father with ontological subordinationism, much as the Arians had done, but instead of leading to a lower Christology, proponents of this position have taken another path of maintaining equality by eliminating obedience and thus the authority of the Father. According to this view, Father, Son, and Spirit are co-equal in every way and if there is obedience, it is temporary. A variation on this is the mutual submission of the Three Persons or the temporary subordination of the Son both of which are proposed by Millard Erickson.<sup>49</sup> This egalitarian interpretation is attractive, because if divine community presents the model for human community, it addresses the fundamental problems of oppression and injustice present in human relationships at all levels.

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<sup>48</sup> For example, Jn. 3:16-17. The Son is given by the Father, and the Son comes.

<sup>49</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 309, 310. Erickson cannot accept eternal subordination and therefore eternal generation because he agrees with Geoffrey Bromiley that generation means inferiority and this can only be temporary otherwise it is ontological. What he does not appear to accept or see is that eternal generation was the patristic expression that secured the understanding of the Father and Son being of the same essence. (309) This also leads Erickson to conclude that there is mutual causation among the Three Persons. (310)

### **Egalitarian Versus Complementarian Debate**

For more than 20 years, a debate among predominately American and Australian evangelicals has hinged on a biblical understanding of subordination. This debate is of particular relevance to this current work, because the two sides on the issue are supporting their position through a similar view regarding the authority of Scripture in theology as well as the integrity of Scripture in its canonical form. While accepting the contributions of biblical scholarship, neither side resorts to defending its position or attacking the other's by invalidating certain Scriptures. Both sides also use the patristics and later church theologians to support their positions.

The names for the sides, egalitarians and complementarians, summarize their understanding of the intra-Trinitarian relationship of the Three Persons. Egalitarians, who are predominantly evangelical feminists and others sympathetic with their position, see an orthodox and biblical understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity as holding to the equality of the Father, Son, and Spirit without any sense of subordination, whether it be essential or functional. Complementarians conclude from the same evidence that the Three Persons are equal in essence or substance, but have complementary roles in which the Father has functional authority over the Son and Spirit in that he sends and they go, he commands and they do. This is all done without any sense of coercion, but in the context of perfect love and perfect alignment of wills. Both sides also see their understanding as providing the proper model for the marriage relationship with 1 Corinthians 11:3 being one of the key battleground verses.

Both sides, perhaps unintentionally, are playing out the consequences of the resurgence of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity and denying Kant's assertion that the doctrine has no practical relevance. Here Scripture connects the Trinity, at least the

relationship between the Father and Son, with what both sides will agree is one of the most foundational, God-ordained relationships in human society – that between husband and wife. If one takes the entirety of Scripture as inspired and authoritative, as these groups do, there is no escaping this connection. Post-Rahner’s axiom,<sup>50</sup> one cannot simply retreat to the economic-immanent distinction (although it is still useful here) or the attributing of this simply to the human nature of God without creating the difficulties that come with doing so. In addition, neither side will explicitly disregard a passage of Scripture, because it does not conform to what might be acceptable in modern society although both accept that some passages are culturally conditioned. Not surprisingly, both sides accuse the other of revising the doctrine of the Trinity. The egalitarians are not only concerned with orthodoxy and conformity to the biblical witness, but they also see the traditional understanding of the Trinity as promoting oppression, abuse, and violence against women and others. Complementarians believe that their understanding of the biblical teaching does not promote these distortions, but in fact, corrects them and that the restoration of a biblical model for marriage is crucial for the establishment of a God-honoring society.

### **The complementarian position**

Much of what has been written from the complementarian perspective in America has been from the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, a group established to address what it sees as a redefining of manhood and womanhood by society and even those within the church. The purpose of the group is to promote a biblical understanding of what it means to be a man and a woman. The “Danvers Statement”, a summary of the group’s purpose and positions, was prepared in December 1987 in Danvers, Mass., and published the following

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<sup>50</sup> Both sides accuse the others of misunderstanding and misusing Rahner’s axiom.

year.<sup>51</sup> In that statement, the group affirms the biblical teachings of men and women being ordained by God as equal persons and distinct in gender roles. It also affirms the detrimental effects of the Fall on the marriage relationship, but the headship of Adam in marriage as being established before the Fall and not the result of sin. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is never referenced directly, the statement does use Trinitarian language in emphasizing equality, persons, distinct roles, and the primacy of love and care in interpersonal relationships.

In a 1996 article, Stephen Kovach studied recent arguments proposed by egalitarian social Trinitarians<sup>52</sup> against the eternal subordination of the Son concluding that these theologians were attempting to “revamp” the understanding of the Trinity. An entry on subordinationism in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* makes no distinction between inferiority of being, status, or role indicating that all are heretical. A more careful understanding of Arian subordinationism shows that even at Nicea where ὁμοούσιος affirms the equal nature of Father and Son against Arianism, there is no denial of the Son’s subordination to the Father with respect to his eternal mission.

While evangelical feminists may believe that an eternal difference in role between Father and Son is heretical, the plain meaning of the word and its use in church history shows that the Son can be voluntarily subordinate for the purpose of a higher cause without being inferior in being or essence.<sup>53</sup>

Kovach goes on to say that “Voluntary subordination is always necessary to the establishment of genuine community. This is true for the Godhead as well as people.” In addition, this “plain meaning” of subordination seen in the Nicene Creed has been understood by all “important” scholars and extends back even to Augustine, who taught both unity and

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<sup>51</sup> *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Wayne Grudem, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 291-294. A complementarian group in Sydney, Australia, has developed a similar document.

<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that not all social Trinitarians are egalitarians.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen D. Kovach, “Egalitarians revamp doctrine of the Trinity: Bilezikian, Grenz, and the Kroegers deny eternal subordination of the Son”, *Journal of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 2 (1) : 2, <http://www.cbmw.org/Journal/Vol-2-No-1/Egalitarians-Revamp-Doctrine-of-the-Trinity>, accessed 31 July 2009. Kovach cites Michael Baumann’s study of Arianism.

subordination in the processions. The only evangelical systematic theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century not to hold to the eternal subordination of the Son are J. Oliver Buswell and Millard Erickson.<sup>54</sup>

The eternality of the Son, which is affirmed several times in Scripture, also contributes to understanding the eternal subordination of the Son. “In his role as agent of creation, redemption and restoration within the Godhead, the Scripture reveals Jesus as eternally the Son.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus’ learning of obedience (Heb. 5:8) does not argue against this, because it refers to the obedience that the Son learned as the human Jesus.

The scriptural case for the complementarian position is worked out through exegesis of key passages, including 1 Cor. 11:3: “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” This verse is important because it links the intra-Trinitarian relationship of Christ to God with the relationships of man to Christ and wife to husband. The dispute centers on the meaning of κεφαλή, used three times in its nominative form, first as the subject of the first clause and then anarthously as the complement in the second and third clauses. In the verses that follow (4-7, 10, 13), Paul is using the word in a physical sense. But in verse 3, it is being used differently. Complementarians see the meaning here as “authority” with egalitarians seeing it as “source”.<sup>56</sup>

Gilbert Bilezikian states emphatically that “*head* in the language of New Testament churches did not mean ‘authority’ or ‘leader’”<sup>57</sup> and uses H. G. Lidell and R. Scott’s *A Greek-English Lexicon* and G. Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* as

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<sup>54</sup> Kovach is citing Philip Schaff’s work for the historical data (2). The 20<sup>th</sup>-century information is from p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Kovach, 4.

<sup>56</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16”, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 117-132.

<sup>57</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman’s Place in Church and Family*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 105.

support for interpreting the word as “source”.<sup>58</sup> He argues that contextually and syntactically there is no support for a hierarchical interpretation and that verse three is better understood in a chronological sense.<sup>59</sup> In his study of Ephesians 5:23, Bilezikian addresses the meaning of κεφαλὴ again appealing to the context and admonishing Bible translators for using a word that did not have the same meaning in the receptor language as it did in the original language.<sup>60</sup>

Wayne Grudem has studied this word extensively looking at the biblical, patristic, and classical usage, and in one of his most recent works included a 1997 letter from the editor of the Lidell-Scott Lexicon. The lexical evidence used by egalitarians is the LSJ entry on κεφαλὴ, which includes “source” as a definition using as an example the source of a river. In the letter, the editor indicated that the “supposed sense ‘source’ of course does not exist” and that the LSJ should have given the example as an alternative definition specific to its use with a river.<sup>61</sup>

In this same work, Grudem gives an interchange with an egalitarian scholar, Catherine Kroeger, that provides an example of the dialogue taking place between the two sides. Both begin with Scripture, in this case 1 Cor. 11:3 and Eph. 5:23, see κεφαλὴ as the key term, and study the use of the word in Greek literature and as interpreted by the early church to gain an understanding of the word as close as possible to authorial intent. Kroeger concluded that the church fathers “vehemently” argued that Paul used the term to mean “source”, and she cited John Chrysostom as saying, among other things, “only a heretic” would interpret it as

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<sup>58</sup> Bilezikian, note 13, 226.

<sup>59</sup> Although there is contextual and syntactical analysis, the chronological interpretation relies on defining κεφαλὴ as “source”, or “origin”; using a very broad definition of “origin” that obscures the diverse ways Christ is the origin of man, man is the origin of woman, and God is the origin of Christ, which makes Paul’s meaning ambiguous; and ignoring the implications of verse 12 in which Paul could have stated, “... the woman is the κεφαλὴ of the man” had he wanted to make the case of equality.

<sup>60</sup> Bilezikian, 119-120.

<sup>61</sup> Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of κεφαλὴ (“Head”): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged”, in *Biblical Foundations for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 188-189. Unfortunately, although this article is listed in the bibliography of the third edition (2006) of Bilezikian’s *Beyond Sex Roles*, he does not deal directly with the letter or Grudem’s conclusions about it.

“authority”. Grudem responds by reviewing the citations in their context and concluding in the above case that Chrysostom never made the statements and in fact taught that the term does mean “authority”.<sup>62</sup> In one instance, Grudem uses the same Chrysostom quote used by Kroeger to support her position but includes the portions that had been elided by Kroeger. From this, he concludes that the elisions (e.g., “let then the head regulate the rest of the body” and “directing like a steersman”) actually show Chrysostom believed the opposite of what Kroeger proposed.<sup>63</sup>

Because of a common approach to theology, the exchange between Grudem and Kroeger takes place at the level of the quality of scholarship. Compare this to Kovach’s critique of Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s Trinitarian views that also adopt an egalitarian model. He sees in her theology an over-emphasis on salvation history, which she does as an interpretation of Rahner’s axiom, disregarding the metaphysical understanding of who God is and seeing the equality of women grounded in the economic Trinity that has as its ruling idea interrelationship. The human experience of God in salvation history is the authoritative revelation for LaCugna, which leads to the epistemological position that experience interprets Scripture and the Scripture cannot reveal anything outside of this experience. This subjective, existential approach opens the possibility of redefining who God is.<sup>64</sup> Here the difference is epistemological and without agreement at this level, the discussion is limited and raises the question: Can the Trinitarian views of someone who makes the human experience of salvation primary and the Bible as a subset of that experience be the same as someone who makes the Bible the supreme authority and all other human experience as secondary? If not, what can be gained in dialogue between two sides that have different sources of authority?

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 185. The text in question is *Homily 5 on 1-2 Thessalonians* (NPNF first series, Vol. 13, 397).

<sup>64</sup> Kovach, 6. He has a similar critique of Gunton, who although taking a higher view of Scripture, leaves certain parts as superior to others and uses *περιχορήσις* as the hermeneutical filter through which he looks at other Scripture (Gunton, *Promise*, 80). Not surprisingly, Gunton’s view is a more moderate position accepting subordination in a non-permanent sense and conflating subordinationism and obedience. (*Promise*, 198)



The aforementioned committed pluralism at first might not seem as useful here, because both groups accept the revelation of God as Trinity but differ significantly over what that means. But both groups can still, and often do, conduct themselves with the spirit of humility Hart identified in Barth's approach.

### **The egalitarian position**

The egalitarian position holds that subordination means not only that the Son is of the same nature as the Father, but also that he is in no way subordinate or under the authority of the Father in an eternal sense. For egalitarians, the argument hinges on the word "eternal". That which is eternal is ontological according to egalitarians. This leads some, such as Kevin Giles and Bilezikian, to conclude that eternal subordination means ontological subordination. Temporal, voluntary subordination is acceptable, but not eternal subordination.<sup>65</sup> As indicated in the disputed interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:3, the egalitarians believe this has been the consistent orthodox position of the church throughout church history. In fact, Bilezikian argues that in verses such as this one Paul is refuting the position of his heretical, hierarchical opponents, even using their words, in order to defend an egalitarian position.<sup>66</sup> This position directly affects believers in two specific areas: the marriage relationship and the church.

For the egalitarian position, the key Scripture is Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Complementarian Hove points out that virtually every egalitarian scholar uses this verse in support of their views and that the egalitarian organization Christians for Biblical Equality uses it as its "hallmark verse".<sup>67</sup> For egalitarians, this verse provides the interpretive

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<sup>65</sup> Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2002), 31. See also Erickson, 309.

<sup>66</sup> Bilezikian, 105.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Hove, "Does Galatians 3:28 Negate Gender-Specific Roles?", in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 105-106.

context for other texts, because it provides the ideal community for God and therefore what we should be living out and striving to establish on earth.

Again, the discussion centers on the meaning of one word. In this case, the word is “one”, or ἓν. For egalitarians, the meaning is “unity without distinction”, connoting equality. Rebecca Groothuis sees the verse as declaring that free Jewish males no longer “have special religious status and privilege” and “a denial of the relevance of gender, race, or class to the assignment of spiritual roles and privileges”.<sup>68</sup> It is the elevating of women, slaves, and Gentiles to be in every way equal to Jewish men in the new covenant. In using this verse as the context for other relevant passages, the egalitarians then see passages on marriage like Eph. 5:21 as teaching mutual subordination and removing any sense of the headship of the husband. Similarly, teachings on the role of men and women in the church are interpreted as meaning that all roles and offices are open to everyone regardless of gender. In fact, Giles, who sees the key verse as Gen. 1:26-27, believes this equality provides a hermeneutical rule that categorizes as culturally conditioned (and thus not relevant to the world today) any Scripture that refers to the subordination of wives or anyone else for that matter.<sup>69</sup>

The complementarians conclude that an examination of Galatians 3:28 reveals that the clause “you are all one” is not referring to equality, but to unity of that which is diverse. Hove surveys similar uses of ἓν with plural forms of εἶμι in the New Testament and in other Greek literature within 300 years of the writing of Galatians and concludes: “*The expression ‘you are all one’ is used of diverse objects to state that these different objects share something in common.*”<sup>70</sup> The clause does not indicate how the parts are related, only that they are related. He adds that the (1) lexical range of meaning of ἓν does not include equality; (2) the immediate context of the clause in Galatians is not about equality but the universal efficacy

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<sup>68</sup> Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 35-36, as quoted in Hove, 138.

<sup>69</sup> Giles, 202.

<sup>70</sup> Hove, 118. The emphasis is his.

of the work of Christ; (3) similar Pauline expressions bring into unity diverse items; and (4) New Testament expressions involving describing people as one always indicate a distinction of roles.<sup>71</sup> Hove does grant that this clause means that the two opposing items are equal in that they both are in Christ, but it does not indicate they are equal in any other respects.<sup>72</sup>

In his study of Galatians 3:28, Gordon Fee argues that the verse is more about Paul's ecclesiology rather than his soteriology. Paul is writing in the context of the new creation, and although he does not explicitly mention structures or roles, these are being called into question. "And to give continuing *significance* to a male-authority viewpoint for men and women, whether at home or in the church, is to reject the new creation in favor of the norms of a fallen world."<sup>73</sup> As with Giles, Fee sees this context as being the hermeneutical principle through which passages that indicate subordination should be interpreted. His conclusion is that in the new creation the Spirit's gifting precedes roles and structures.

Again here, neither side is overtly or consciously arguing how our experience with God should redefine the Scriptural teaching regarding who God is. Both have an unwavering commitment to the truth and authority of the Bible, and yet using similar hermeneutical approaches come to opposing views.

### Summary

Two questions directed at each side emerge from this debate and summarize the significance of this current study: (1) Can there be Trinity if the Son is subordinate in any way to the Father? and (2) Is some subordination of the Son to the Father necessary to have distinctions in the Trinity that are consistent with the biblical witness? Both sides reject ontological subordination in the Trinity, and both accept at least temporal functional

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 134. He cites 1 Cor. 3:8, Jn. 10:30, 17:11, 21, 22, 23; Mt. 19:6; Mk. 10:8; Rom. 12:5; and 1 Cor. 10:17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>73</sup> Gordon D. Fee, "Male and Female in the New Creation: Galatians 3:26-29", in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, (Downer's Grove.: Intervarsity, 2005), 185.

subordination in the economic Trinity. However, the disagreement occurs over whether the subordination of the Son is eternal and whether the subordination, if it can be called that, is based on the authority of the Father or on the Father's role as the eternal source. This study will address these questions in light of Scripture and Christian theology.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Scope and Significance**

This study will look at the relationship of the Father and the Son with special emphasis on the obedience of the Son to the Father and whether this constitutes ontological subordination. It will examine whether the eternal obedience of the Son to the Father is essential to Trinitarian theology and consistent with the witness of Scripture and the Person and work of Jesus Christ. This study intends to do more than just demonstrate the historical position of the church or the proper interpretation of Scripture on this matter, looking to see to what extent the eternal obedience of the Son unifies Trinitarian theology and if it does not, why belief in it in fact is heretical.

The significance of the study is threefold. First, if an egalitarian view is correct and obedience is ontological subordinationism, then all who hold this position would be Arians of some sort although many would be without the problematic soteriology, the implicit polytheism, or the flawed defense of monism that is often characteristic of this position. Church history has demonstrated that there can be no true Christian fellowship with Arians. This could also raise the question of whether these "neo-Arians" have found an orthodox understanding of ontological subordinationism. Second, if the Trinity is in some way a model for human community, does the egalitarian view exclude all types of authority? Which raises the question: Can a dynamic community of diverse individuals with various abilities, levels of maturity, and experiences that exists in a world of constantly changing contexts function as

a community without some form of authority and obedience? If not, an egalitarian Trinity would appear to be only an ideal community reserved for divine beings and really does not communicate anything of use in this world and the doctrine truly is irrelevant. Third, as the second point implies, the definition of subordination informs the definition of others words such as equality, freedom, community, obedience, and love. As words of the revelation, if their meanings are changed, the revelation itself is changed. The battle over the word “subordination” points to a greater battle over the revelation of Jesus Christ, and thus God, himself.

### **Approach**

As stated earlier, the recent resurgence in Trinitarian theology has not been undertaken with a common epistemology or shared set of presuppositions and this creates at least the potential for views so divergent that though they might be using the same words, they are not speaking the same language. In light of this, this study will use an approach to theology that follows, at least generally, the approach used by John Calvin, which T. F. Torrance summarizes in his work on the Trinity. Calvin believed that “Trinity of Persons in the one Being of God” summarizes all that Scripture says.<sup>74</sup> Torrance states that Calvin’s “biblical, Christological and soteriological approach to God through his saving self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Scripture, is one in which we seek to know him strictly in accordance with what he is in his divine Nature and with who he is in his living and saving activity toward us.”<sup>75</sup> The objective is to avoid focusing on the Trinity to the exclusion of the cross and the Bible, but rather to see the intrinsic connection they have.

This approach holds together the Christian beliefs related directly to the revelation of God, which therefore are interrelated, namely (1) the doctrine of the Trinity, (2) the person

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas F. Torrance is citing *Institutes* 1.13.5. (*The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996], 12)

<sup>75</sup> Torrance, 12.

and work of Jesus Christ including his incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection,<sup>76</sup> and (3) the Bible as the inspired, authoritative record of the revelation of God. These three doctrines reveal the same God with the work of Christ being primarily historical, the doctrine of the Trinity primarily theological, and the Bible as the inspired record. This is not to say these are not more than what they primarily are, but it is to say that the work of Christ reveals in history the truth of who God is, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals the same truth theologically, and the Bible records that truth.<sup>77</sup>

Approaching theology as Calvin did is not unique to the Reformer, but similar to the approach used by the early church fathers. In his recent major work on the Arian controversy, Hanson states, “Both sides – indeed all sides, for there were more than two – appealed confidently to tradition to support them. All sides believed that they had the authority of Scripture in their favor.”<sup>78</sup> Donald Fairbairn argued that it was axiomatic for the patristics that all doctrine must be linked to soteriology and the question for them was what kind of God could effect this kind of salvation.<sup>79</sup> The church has long recognized that to surrender any of these three beliefs opens the remaining beliefs to redefinition and reinterpretation without the proper context, which of course leads to misconstruing who God is.

A canonical understanding of the Bible will be assumed. Although the state of canonization even in the fourth century left some books in question with regards to being included in or excluded from the canon, for the most part, the authoritative books of the Bible

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<sup>76</sup> This also follows Gunton’s criticism of the tendency since Barth to see the cross as the key to understanding the Trinity. He says it is a weakness in the West to consider the cross separate from the incarnation and resurrection, which makes punishment the center of God’s justifying plan. (Gunton, *Promise*, 178)

<sup>77</sup> Through the work of the Spirit, experience also plays an important role through sanctification and increased understanding of the revelation.

<sup>78</sup> Hanson, xix.

<sup>79</sup> Donald Fairbairn, “The One Person Who Is Jesus Christ: The Patristic Perspective”, in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, (Nashville: Academic, 2007), 92; and *Life in the Trinity: Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2009), 6. See also Bruce Ware (“Christ’s Atonement: A Work of the Trinity”, in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, 187) and Fred Sanders, who argues that the patristics saw the three main doctrines as the atonement, incarnation, and Trinity as well as the authority of Scripture as divine revelation. (“Chalcedonian Categories for Gospel Narrative”, in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, 8)

used during the development of Trinitarian theology are the same as the ones today. The main arguments used from the various sides were largely supported using canonical books and no key argument relied exclusively on a non-canonical book or even those considered questionable. The attitude toward Scripture is not that it is exhaustively and exclusively truth, but, as Francis Schaeffer writes, it is truth that points to truth.<sup>80</sup>

This is a study about a term and related terms, and while the truth of the revelation is assumed to be unchanging, the terms used to express it are not necessarily so. If a term no longer can communicate effectively what it once did, it seems that it should be replaced with one that can do so.<sup>81</sup> However, whenever a term is dropped or replaced, there is at least the potential that the change will result in a loss of understanding and so it seems this should be done with caution. This is particularly true for words of the revelation. The approach used here will be to allow as much as possible for the revelation to define the term and then to evaluate the term based on contemporary connotations and not the meaning it has in the context of the revelation. The intent is to first determine what the term communicates with regard to the revelation and if this is considered significant, to determine whether to assess whether contemporary usage confuses or clarifies what is trying to be communicated through the term.

Jesus himself provides transformative meaning to the word “Father”. To Gentiles, it did not connote ὁμοούσιος as the church would later accept, but instead when used in reference to deity, it meant God as creator. But when Jesus referred to God as “my Father” the Jewish leaders in Scripture understood at least in part that he was asserting equality with God (Jn. 5:18).<sup>82</sup> Jesus does not directly refute this understanding, but he does clarify that he

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<sup>80</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason: A Penetrating Analysis of Trends in Modern Thought*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1968), 21.

<sup>81</sup> This is not an endorsement of the movement to rename God. In the opinion of this writer, “Father”, “Son”, and “Spirit” are the revealed names of the Three Persons and thus should not be treated as terms.

<sup>82</sup> This could be disingenuous on the Jewish leaders’ part because the phrase did occur (Sir 51:10) though not commonly in Jewish writings. Jesus removes any doubt to his meaning in his subsequent response. (H. W.

is not God the Father by maintaining the distinction of God giving all to him in such a way that his actions, will, and glory are the same as the Father's. The early church's development of Trinitarian theology often hinges on re-defining a word (e.g., ὑποστάσις) and at one point even allowing two words, ὁμοούσιος and ὁμοιούσιος, to refer to the same definition. All parties involved in these early controversies understood that words receive their meaning from context. If the context changes or is different, the word can take on a different meaning. Therefore, it is important to understand as best as possible the original context. The early church fathers tried, albeit with varying degrees of success and using different hermeneutical approaches, to keep their theology in the context of the revelation of God through Jesus Christ as recorded in Scripture.

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity that relates directly to subordination occurs primarily in the first five centuries of church history. In chapter two, this study will survey how the patristics understood subordination and the obedience of the Son to the Father, how the understanding of the terms developed during the theological controversies, and how consistent their views were with the witness of Scripture. The main question is whether the Bible and the patristics viewed the obedience of the Son to the Father as evidence of ontological subordination.

In chapters three and four, the views of two more contemporary theologians will be considered. P. T. Forsyth and Jürgen Moltmann wrote on either end of the century of resurgence of Trinitarian theology. While sharing many similarities, they both see subordination as important to their theology. As one of the most influential Trinitarian theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Moltmann is an obvious choice. Not only individual theologians, but entire theological movements have taken their lead from Moltmann including liberation and feminist theologies. His critique of the strict monotheism that

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Kuhn, "Abba", in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. H.R. Balz & G. Schneider, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-c1993], 1)



dominated theology in the West since Augustine has been crucial to the renewed emphasis on the social Trinity. In response to Kant's claim of the Trinity's irrelevance, Moltmann has emphasized that the Trinity is not only relevant, but also indispensable to the future of Christianity and the world. Forsyth is the more unusual choice, largely because he has very little to say explicitly about the Trinity. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he saw the emptiness of the religious liberalism that he had once believed and began to see the need for Christianity to regain its center and thus its power. For the coming crises, Forsyth sought expedient expressions of truth. And so with metaphysics always in the background, Forsyth brought to the fore the cross of Jesus Christ. Only from the revelation of Jesus Christ could Forsyth then proceed to an understanding of the Trinity thereby maintaining that important tie between soteriology and Trinitarian theology.

In the final chapter, the views of Forsyth and Moltmann along with those found in Scripture and the patristics will be brought into discussion on the subordination and obedience of the Son. There will also be a return to the current debate among evangelicals to see how the results of the study might be useful in that discussion. Concluding comments will focus on an understanding of subordination and obedience consistent with Scripture and the doctrine of the Trinity as well as the implication of that understanding for Christianity and the world today.

## **CHAPTER II. SURVEY OF TRINITARIAN EQUALITY AND SUBORDINATION OF THE SON IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The question of whether the Christian understanding of subordination and equality are mutually exclusive with regards to the relationship of the Father and the Son begins with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the written record of that revelation in Scripture, and the early church's developing understanding and articulation of Trinitarian theology and Christology, especially with regards to the deity of Jesus. If the concepts are indeed mutually exclusive, one would expect to find the two set in opposition to one another or at the very least one emphasized with the other minimized or neglected altogether. It would be expected that any suggestion of subordination of any sort would be immediately denounced as incompatible with belief in an equal Father and Son. However, if the two are not mutually exclusive, one would expect to find at least attempts to qualify or identify conditions under which the two can be in harmony. This is not a general concern of logic, but a concern of the logic of the revelation that the early church was experiencing and had found in Scripture.

Beginning with the scriptural witness and moving through the Nicene crisis to Augustine, this chapter will survey church thought on this matter during the major developmental period of the doctrine of the Trinity. The theologians of this period sought to establish their doctrine of God based on their interpretation of what they found in Scripture and the beliefs of the church. Therefore it is important to look at what Scripture records on this matter before looking at how the early church fathers understood it. The intent is to approach Scripture in a literal way, to attempt as best as possible to understand what the author was communicating and to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. The plain meaning of the text is not necessarily all the text has to

say, but it is at least an important part of what we can know with confidence that the text does say as opposed to what it might or could say. The emphasis in this section will be on the Gospel of John, because the Fourth Gospel directly asserts the deity of the Son more than any other book of the Bible and also includes numerous statements by Jesus that indicate some type of subordination. Not surprisingly, this Gospel played an important role in the Trinitarian controversies. The purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive list of relevant texts, but to provide sufficient evidence from the Bible to understand the overall teaching on the matter.

Following this examination of Scripture, this study will survey some of the major contributors to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the East and West to look specifically at their understanding of subordination and equality with regards to the relationship of the Father and the Son. Again, the purpose here is not to be exhaustive but to understand the major positions, both heretical and orthodox, on these matters that helped shape the doctrine of the Trinity and how they understood the scriptural witness. Each of these theologians began with a common desire to articulate clearly the Christian understanding of God, but they were doing so in an often polemical environment facing opponents who were as adept at using Scripture as they were. They also sought to defend Christian theology to a culture that was often hostile toward them. As a result of both of these factors, these theologians increasingly faced the need to express themselves in philosophical thought and language that strayed from Scripture, but, in their opinion, expressed more clearly what Scripture was communicating. The underlying question is whether they strayed too far.

This survey of scriptural teaching and the thought of the early church fathers is especially relevant to this overall study. Both Moltmann and Forsyth see Scripture as authoritative in Christian theology and want to develop an understanding of God that is biblical. Both also draw,

though not uncritically, from the church fathers. This survey then will help in comparing the more modern theologians with their predecessors and in determining, where they differ, which views are most consistent with the doctrine of the Trinity, the work of Jesus Christ, and the Bible.

## **THE GOSPEL OF JOHN**

The use of language in the New Testament that indicates both equality and subordination of the Son to the Father is found in the words of Jesus, never more directly than in the statement "... for the Father is greater than I." Within this same context, Jesus clarifies what he means by stating "... but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father". (Jn. 14:28-31)<sup>1</sup> There is no qualification of this statement by Jesus. The Father commands and Jesus obeys as an expression of his love for the Father. Earlier, Jesus had made a similar statement regarding the superiority of the Father ("My Father ... is greater than all") that was immediately followed by the statement, "I and the Father are one." (Jn. 10:29-30) Though in this specific context, Jesus is comparing the greatness of the Father to those who would attempt to snatch his sheep from him, his statement of equating himself with the Father is clear. Although there has been some discussion regarding what exactly Jesus is referencing, the Jews on the scene are presented as understanding that Jesus is equating himself with God, wanting to stone him for the perceived blasphemy. Jesus does not deny the charge but clarifies by calling himself the Son of God while acknowledging that he was sent by the Father and is doing the work of the Father, and that he and the Father mutually indwell one another. This is a proper defense, because Jesus is not claiming to be God in the way the Jews are presented as thinking though he is claiming to be God. His clarification is consistent with his earlier use of *ἐν*, a neuter noun, in which Jesus is not saying he is God the Father, but that he is one with the Father. They are not

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Bible passages are from the English Standard Version.

the same person, but they are the same “thing”. Although there are contextual indications that Jesus means he and the Father are of one mind<sup>2</sup>, there is also a similar use of ἐν in 17:21 (πάντες ὧσιν ἐν ...) where the meaning is clearly a mutual indwelling of the Father and Son (καθὼς σὺ πάτερ ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ γὰρ ἐν σοί). This is also consistent with the Johannine Prologue in which the Word, who is the Son, is both with God (contextually the Father) and God. (Jn. 1:1)

When read in the light of the overall emphasis of the Gospel of John on the deity of Jesus, these verses bring together the deity and the subordination of the Son<sup>3</sup>, not just the human Jesus, to the Father. John begins with the most direct declaration of the deity of Jesus in the first verse of the gospel and near the end records Thomas’ confession of Jesus as Lord and God. (Jn. 20:28) Throughout the narrative John develops an understanding of the intimate relationship of the Father and Son mostly through the words of Jesus, who boldly declares his oneness with the Father<sup>4</sup> while also pointing out the priority of the Father. In his response to Philip, Jesus again speaks of his oneness with the Father, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”, while in the same statement saying his words and works have their source of authority in the Father. (Jn. 14:9-11) Here also Jesus places his relationship in the context of the mutual indwelling that he and the Father share. If one takes a simplistic understanding of subordination in which authority

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<sup>2</sup> Borchert takes this to mean a oneness of will or purpose on the task of giving eternal life to his sheep, noting, however, that this in no way implies an Arian subordination because the overall teaching of the Gospel is the deity of the Son. (G. L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, vol. 25a, *New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, Kenneth A. Matthews, and David S. Dockery [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996], electronic version Oak Harbor: Logos Library System, 1997, 341).

<sup>3</sup> In the John 10 passage, Jesus identifies himself as the Son of God. The Gospel of Matthew also asserts the Sonship of Jesus (2:15; 3:16; 8:29; 11:27; 16:16; 17:5; 27:54; 28:18) and his deity in the prophesied name “Immanuel” (1:23) and his receiving of worship (2:11; cf. 4:9). Jesus also refers to himself as Lord but clearly delineates his role as a gatekeeper or judge of sorts for the kingdom from that of the Father, whose will is being applied (7:21-23). In this gospel, many people call Jesus “lord” (κύριε) as an honorific title synonymous with “master”. But when Jesus uses it in reference to himself it is connected with divine authority. When he refers to himself as “Lord of the Sabbath”, he is asserting his sovereign authority to interpret specifically Sabbath law here, but that could be extended, as Paul does, to include the entire law (12:8; see also Mt. 22:41-45). In 18:19-20, Jesus states that his role among gathered believers is to enact the will of the Father. There are other instances when Jesus defers to his Father’s authority (e.g., 20:23; 24:35; 26:29; 26: 39-44; 26:53)

<sup>4</sup> In addition to those cited in this paragraph, the ἐγὼ εἰμί statements by Jesus are testimonies to this, in particular Jn. 8:58 and 18:6.

must mean ontological superiority, Jesus and John at the very least are making contradictory statements unless one assumes a temporal economic change in the Son that is not supported in the text or the overall testimony of Scripture. A similar case in Matthew records Jesus describing in one statement the exclusive mutual knowledge of the Son and Father toward each other, an evidence of equality, and the subordination of the Son.<sup>5</sup>

Certain scriptures can be categorized as referring to the human nature of Jesus, such as those indicating physical need or learning. (e.g., “I thirst” [Jn. 19:28]; “And Jesus increased in ...” [Lk. 2:52]; “... he learned obedience ...” [Heb. 5:8]). The verses cited in the previous paragraph cannot be so easily categorized because they are statements by Jesus about himself that at once reference subordination and equality requiring Jesus to switch mid-sentence from speaking of his humanity then divinity. In the immediate context at minimum, Jesus is referring to the authority of the Father to send the Son prior to the incarnation.<sup>6</sup> When taken with the greater context of the New Testament, the reference is to before creation with the Son equal to the Father (e.g., “the image of the invisible God” and “the Word was God”) and the Son as the Father’s active agent.<sup>7</sup> If time is part of creation, this relationship must transcend time and would be difficult to limit to the economy of creation and redemption.<sup>8</sup> Later when Paul writes about the Son’s subjecting all things to himself and then subjecting himself to the Father (1 Cor. 15:28), the apostle uses a future tense verb (ὑποσταγήσεται) for the subjection of the Son to the Father without indicating that this situation is temporary. This verse is not a contradiction of the Lordship of the Son as described in verses such as Phil. 2:9-10, and in fact, might be another way of stating the same process. In the Philippians passage, through the exaltation of Jesus by God

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<sup>5</sup> Mt. 11:27. It is the juxtaposition of these statements that makes it difficult to argue that Jesus is saying that the handing over of authority is a condition of his humanity and not his Sonship.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jn. 3:16.

<sup>7</sup> Jn. 1:1; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:2.

<sup>8</sup> The Arians recognized this inconsistency and asserted that there was a time before time when the Son was created.

(context would indicate God the Father) everyone bows to Jesus εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς. The bowing, indicating subjection, is in the context of bringing glory to the Father.

Equality and subordination are attested to in the divine names Father and Son, which show the Father as the source of the Son. Similarly, Word, image, and radiance all imply a source that emits what it is but is indivisibly connected to the emission. We can think of these separately, but they cannot in reality be separated. Although analogies always fail to communicate fully the Triune relationship, the Johannine way of speaking about the relationship of the Father and Son consistently communicates that the Father sends and the Son is sent. The Johannine prologue is quite clear on this point describing the Word who was with God and was God as being the only Son who is from the Father.

In these passages, the Bible seems to declare directly that the Son (or the Word) is God but under the Father's authority pre-incarnate, during the incarnation, and into the future. However, the Son does the Father's will willingly as indicated by Jesus in several places in Scripture including John 10:18 where Jesus declares that he has authority to lay down his life and that it is a charge from the Father.<sup>9</sup> The eternal generation of the Son can also be deduced from the scriptural teachings of one God, eternity as an attribute of God, the Father as God, and the Son as God. What is more obscure concerns whether the subordination that is evident in the economic relationship of the Father and Son extends to the immanent Trinity largely because the Bible says little if anything regarding an immanent Trinity.<sup>10</sup> Even in the passages indicating mutual indwelling (Jn. 10:38, 14:10, 11, 17:21), there is nothing in the text that requires

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<sup>9</sup> Mt. 26:53 echoes this sentiment as Jesus rebukes Peter, who had attacked one of the men arresting Jesus, by saying at any time he could ask the Father to send 12 legions of angels to rescue him.

<sup>10</sup> The creation account in Genesis 1 has been seen as evidence of a multiplicity in God although the Hebrew people did not interpret it this way. Even if a Trinitarian interpretation is valid, the distinctions indicated in verses 2 and 26 occur after the creation process has been initiated and is not necessarily referring to the immanent Trinity. In Acts 7:56, Stephen's vision just before his death might also be considered another glimpse into the Godhead.

understanding an immanent Trinity distinguished from an economic Trinity. In the one instance that a verb is stated (14:10), Jesus uses the present tense indicating that this is an ongoing reality for him. Since the Bible has little to say directly regarding the immanent Trinity, what can be understood must be drawn from largely what it says about God in the economy. Without biblical language to speak of the immanent Trinity, the early church fathers imported language from philosophy and increasingly refined this language as they faced internal and external challenges to what they believed to be true. It is unlikely that this could be done without philosophy affecting their theology. This raises the questions regarding how philosophy affected theology and whether the effects contradict Scripture.

### **New Testament Understanding of Subordination and Obedience**

Before proceeding to the thought of the early church fathers, it is important to understand the New Testament attitude toward subordination, especially when understood as being under another's authority or command. In current usage, the connotations of subordination are largely negative and rightly so given the abuse of authority in a fallen world that too often leads to oppression at the interpersonal to the societal level. If this is the only understanding of subordination, it is incompatible with the message and the hope of the Gospel. However, the New Testament, written in and to a fallen world, does not have a negative view of subordination and, in fact, as will be demonstrated below, includes it as crucial to being a follower of Christ.

Some of the Scripture passages that relate to the subordination of the Son to the Father have already been seen to at least indicate economic subordination as discussed previously. However, even more compelling from the New Testament is the positive attitude toward submitting to another's authority and that to be under authority in no way connotes inferiority of



being. There are more than 20 examples of the use of forms of the word ὑποτάσσω in the New Testament, translated most often as “submit” or “subject”.<sup>11</sup> No use implies ontological inferiority resulting from being under authority even when there is obvious ontological inferiority (e.g., as that between God and man in Heb. 12:9 or Jam. 4:7). Jesus is described as being submissive to his parents (Lk. 2:51), believers are exhorted to submit to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1), and younger believers are told to submit to elders (1 Pet. 5:5). None of these situations from three different New Testament writers implies ontological subordination, and Jesus’ submission to his parents is just the opposite – the ontologically superior submits to the ontologically inferior. Two other verses bear a closer look. In Ephesians 5:21, believers are told to submit to one another. If ontology is in the mind of Paul, it is ontological equality and not ontological subordination. He writes in 1 Corinthians 15:27-28 that everything is subject to the Son, except the Father, and that the Son subjects himself to the Father. In the first instance there is ontological subordination of creation to the Son, but in the second, there is not, yet in both instances Paul has no difficulty in acknowledging authority. The New Testament writers see no connection between being under authority and being ontologically inferior, but instead they see it as a significant part of living the Christian life.

A similar case can be made by studying the various words translated as “obey” or “obedience” in the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> As with “submit” or “subject”, the writers are not in any way indicating that the one who obeys is necessarily inferior to the one who is being obeyed. In addition, obedience is extolled as characteristic of being a Christian and is connected directly to faith on multiple occasions (Rom. 15:18; Acts 6:6-7). John relates obedience to true love (1 Jn.

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<sup>11</sup> Other words translated similarly include ὑποκρίνω, ὑπείκω, ἑνοχος, δογματίζομαι, ἐνέχομαι, and ὑποταγή. The word ἀνυπότακτος was used to refer to insubordination. In all cases, ontological subordination or equality was not at issue.

<sup>12</sup> These words include ὑποακούω, πειθαρχέω, ὑπήκοος γενέσθαι, πράσσω, πείθομαι, and ποιέω. Words translated as “disobedience” include ἀπειθής, παρέχω, παρακοή, ἀπειθεία, and ἀνυπότακτοι.

5:2). Believers are often praised for their obedience (Rom. 1:5, 16:19; 2 Cor. 7:15). On the other side, disobedience is included in vice lists (Rom. 1:30; 1 Tim. 1:9, 2 Tim. 3:2) and associated closely with sin (Eph.2:2, 5:6). Paul sums up the attitude of the New Testament on the matter in Romans 5:19 where he describes Adam's disobedience as making many sinners and Christ's obedience as making many righteous. Obedience is crucial to the atonement, an expression of faith and love from those made new in Christ, and therefore highly valued by God. Obedience is central to God's plans, and thus the same must be said of authority. The Bible does not view submission, subjection, obedience, and authority as ontological.

The Bible does, however, speak against abusive authority. The Old Testament passage that Jesus quotes in his reading of Scripture in a Nazareth synagogue speaks of freeing the oppressed.<sup>13</sup> The accusation of social injustice and oppression is brought by the prophets against Israel throughout the Old Testament and, along with idolatry, is one of the main reasons for God's judgment. The Mosaic Law was about protection of people and their property as much as it was about purity. In the New Testament, the qualifications of an overseer include characteristics that would preclude abusing his authority (e.g., above reproach, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, gentle, not quarrelsome). (1 Tim. 3:1-7) Peter is even more specific in his advice to elders "... shepherd the flock that is among you ... not domineering over those in your charge". (1 Peter 5:2-3)

Rather than denouncing authority, the Bible creates the conditions that prevent authority from becoming abusive or oppressive. In the household codes of Ephesians 5:22-6:9, the context for all of these relationships is that the believer view the other person through the relationship he

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<sup>13</sup> John Nolland cautions against spiritualizing this text or viewing the Lukan Jesus as a social reformer. He sees Jesus as being concerned with the physical needs of people. (John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, vol. 35a, *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989], 197).

or she has with God and the relationship the other person has with God. For example, wives submit to husbands “as to the Lord”, husbands love their wives “as Christ loved the church”, slaves obey “as you would Christ, and masters “do the same to them”. For believers in a church, Paul affirms the diversity of gifts (including leading) in the unity of the body and places genuine love for one another as the dominant principle expressed in outdoing “one another in showing honor.” (Rom. 12:4-10; cf. Eph. 5:21) In all of these situations, no one is forced to submit, but the submission is an expression of the love a person has for God and for the person being submitted to. This is exemplified in Phil. 2:7 by Jesus who “made himself nothing” indicating that he was not forced or was of a lesser nature. It seems clear that the Bible is teaching that authority, subordination, and obedience are viewed positively in the context of God’s love if properly understood and expressed. Because this is the case, it might be useful to distinguish that the Bible always condemns oppression while in the context of love views subordination as desirable.

### **EARLY CHURCH FATHERS**

It is from the language of Scripture that the early church fathers found subordination in the relationship of the Father and Son, which the church, particularly in the East, sought to understand in a manner consistent with Scripture and the rule of faith. Although they faced different opponents and heresies, the consistent concern was soteriological and theological – What kind of God could effect this salvation?<sup>14</sup> In Scripture, the name “God” is used almost exclusively to refer to the Father and not the Godhead, and the early church adopts this distinction. It is the Father who creates through the Son, and the Father who sends the Son to the

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<sup>14</sup> Fairbairn sees this as axiomatic for the patristics – all doctrine should be intimately and clearly connected to soteriology. (92)

world. In their names of the revelation, a distinction and an order are at minimum implied.

Though adequate language to express Trinitarian theology would develop over the centuries, the fundamental issue of the equality of Persons and the priority of the Father was integral from the beginning.

### **The Apostolic Fathers**

Very little can be gleaned from the Apostolic Fathers on this matter, who were witnesses more than interpreters, according to J. N. D. Kelly, and did not deal with the problems that would emerge as the church was forced to think more about how to remain monotheistic with the belief that Jesus was divine and distinct from the Father.<sup>15</sup> Ignatius, for example, in his letter to Ephesus writes “God existing in flesh”<sup>16</sup> and later “God Himself being manifested in human form”.<sup>17</sup> In a letter to the Magnesians he writes “Be ye subject to the bishop, and to one another, as Jesus Christ to the Father . . .,”<sup>18</sup> a subjection that in his letter to the Philadelphians is expressed in the present tense.<sup>19</sup> Ignatius also refers to Jesus Christ, the Son and eternal Word, being sent by God.<sup>20</sup> Though it is clear that Ignatius views Jesus as God, he apparently sees no contradiction in viewing this same Jesus as not simply distinct from the Father but in some way subjected to the Father.

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<sup>15</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 90.

<sup>16</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 7. For other examples, see his *Epistle to the Trallians* 7, 9; *Epistle to the Romans* preface, 3; *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 10.1; and *Epistle to Polycarp* 8. Kelly (93) rejects notions that Ignatius was an economic Trinitarian citing the father’s extensive use of the Gospel of John and descriptions of the pre-existence of the Son with the Father (*Letter to the Magnesians* 6).

<sup>17</sup> *Eph.* 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Magn.* 13; cf. 7; *Smyrn.* 1, 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 7; *Smyrn.* 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Magn.* 8. Compare the language of Clement (*1<sup>st</sup> Epistle* 42) and Mathetes (*Epistle to Diognetus* 7).

### Justin Martyr

Through the use of Logos theology, Justin Martyr explains the unity and distinction of God the Father and God the Son, maintaining that both are one God. He states that his opponents do not “know that the Father of the universe has a Son; who also, being the first-begotten Word of God, is even God.”<sup>21</sup> Here he clearly expresses the deity of the Son and the Word, which he gathers from the revelation in Scripture,<sup>22</sup> and that the source of the Son is the Father.

I shall give you another testimony, my friends, ... from the Scriptures, that God begat before all creatures a Beginning, [who was] a certain rational power [proceeding] from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lord, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an angel, then God, and then Lord and Logos ...<sup>23</sup>

Using an analogy of human speech, he concludes that Christ can be called these names because he ministers the Father’s will and was begotten by an act of the Father’s will. From the above passage, one might conclude that Justin is teaching ontological subordination, a distinction between the created and uncreated when he is in fact teaching the opposite.<sup>24</sup> The “Beginning” is distinguished from creatures (note the use of “all creatures” and not “all *other* creatures”), instead of being described as proceeding from the Father and identified as God. Justin is using the language of Scripture (begat) but attempts to keep the understanding of this language in the context of Scripture that teaches that the Logos comes from God yet is God.

To explain the relationship of the Father and Son, Justin Martyr uses the analogy of fire taken from fire to demonstrate that because the Son proceeds from the same source of the Father and is not created, the Son is God, distinct from the Father, and the Father is not diminished nor

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<sup>21</sup> *1 Apology* 63.9. Cf. *Dialogue with Trypho* 128.

<sup>22</sup> *Trypho* 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Trypho* 61.

<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that Justin Martyr and other second-century proponents of Logos theology were successful in using this Christology to maintain the distinction and deity of the Son even if this was their intent. As Alasdair Heron notes, Justin, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Tatian would have accepted the Nicene position, but their Christology would have been an inadequate defense against the Arian Christology that separated the created Son from the Logos of God. (“Logos, Image, Son’: Some Models and Paradigms in Early Christology”, in *Creation, Christ, and Culture: Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance*, ed. W. A. McKinney, [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976], 53)

divided. The Son is not an inanimate power, like an analogy of the sun and its light might imply, but is a “... Person Begotten of the Father’s Substance”.<sup>25</sup> This person is God in “substance”, but he is subject to the Father. “For I affirm that He has never at any time done anything which He who made the world—above whom there is no other God—has not wished Him both to do and to engage Himself with.”<sup>26</sup> This statement indicates not only a subordination to the Father’s authority, but also an eternal subordination.

The role of the Son as revealer of the ineffable Father is what anchors the deity of the Son and gives proper due to what some might discount as a secondary role. Justin holds that the Father is ineffable and transcendent, and he cannot relate directly to humanity, not because of a limitation on his part, but on humanity’s part. He needs the Logos if he wants to communicate with humanity,<sup>27</sup> and for God to need anyone or anything other than Himself would be contrary to what it means to be Almighty God. While Justin Martyr is teaching that the Son proceeds from the source, who is the Father, and does the will of the Father, he also teaches that the Son is the only way for the Father to relate directly with humanity and thus must be God. The role of the Son is vital to the revelation of the Father, and because of the shared deity of the two they each fulfill perfectly their role within the Godhead. The use of plural pronouns in the creation narrative, the reference to two Lords in the destruction of Sodom, and numerous epiphanies provide the scriptural support for this position that are perceived by Justin Martyr as offering a transcendent view of God the Father and the unique role of God the Son as revealer.

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<sup>25</sup> *Trypho* 128.

<sup>26</sup> *Trypho* 56.

<sup>27</sup> *Trypho* 127.

### Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus identifies God as God the Father stating that he is the creator of the universe through the agency of the Son and the Spirit and the same God as the God of the Old Testament patriarchs.<sup>28</sup> The Father is the first cause and the only ingenerate being. Writing against numerous heresies, some of which taught a multiplicity of gods, Irenaeus gives the rationale for one God. If the one God is absolutely free and omnipotent, no other god in this sense could exist because each would have a will and a desire to compete. Omnipotence means all powerful and God cannot have all power if a rival god exists outside his power.<sup>29</sup> It is impossible for omnipotence to be shared in this way, because neither being would be omnipotent.

The Son is co-eternal with the Father and reveals him to all whom he wills. The Son is generated or begotten, which with co-eternality, would seem to indicate it is an eternal generation though Irenaeus does not explicitly state this. God is all mind and all logos, and his thought is logos. Thus to believe that God existed without a mind or had a mind without thought is to divide God, who is necessarily eternal, from his mind or his thoughts.<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus does not, however, attempt to explain how the Son was generated as his opponents did. He simply states that this is not known by anyone but the Father and the Son.<sup>31</sup> Though the Son identified as the Word would indicate some analogy to human speech, Irenaeus warns against using this model, in particular the belief that the Word has a beginning as human speech does. The Word who is the Son always existed with God.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus, *Ag. Heresies* 2.30.9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 2.1.1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 2.28.5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 2. 28.6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 2.25.3.

Though generated, the Son is God as Irenaeus states but does not explain, calling Christ Jesus “our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King”<sup>33</sup> and “the only begotten God”.<sup>34</sup> The Word is also identified with God when Irenaeus, arguing against an instrumentalist view of creation, states that God needs nothing or no one to create but created through the Word. The Word is differentiated from angels, powers inferior to God, the imperfect, and the ignorant. This statement is followed by “But He Himself in Himself ... formed them as He pleased”<sup>35</sup> which clearly parallels the phrasing of the Father and the Word that occurs just before. The reason that this must be so is stated in the clause (“... in order that he who should know Him might become man”), a clause that is difficult to interpret. Harvey believes the translation is attributing to Christians what should be attributed to Christ,<sup>36</sup> but this would mean that the Father created through the Word so that the Word could know the Father and become man. If Mausset’s rendering (“that that man might be formed who should know Him”) is better, the statement is clarified in the following sentences in which all creation, including humanity, was created according to the pleasure of God, and the Father through the Word could confer the proper nature, including spiritual and invisible, upon all creation. An intermediate could not have all of God’s power and perfect alignment with his will unless the intermediate is God.

The Son is God, and there is only one God, yet the Father is above all, including the Son, which Jesus states in John 14:28. Further the Son’s purpose is to reveal the Father. “But the Son performs the good pleasure of the Father; for the Father sends, and the Son is sent, and comes.”<sup>37</sup> Though God Himself, the Son is clearly subordinate to the Father, called “the Head of Christ”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 1.10.1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 4.20.11.

<sup>35</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 2.2.4

<sup>36</sup> Fn. 8, *ANF*, vol. 1, 361.

<sup>37</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 4.6.3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 5.28.2.



at one point, and this subordination is essential to the revelatory task of the Son, who reveals the Father by going as sent and living in a manner consistent with the Father's will.<sup>39</sup> The roles of Father, Son, and Spirit with regards to the creation of humanity are laid out clearly: "... the Father planned everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made] ..."<sup>40</sup> The Father's two hands, the Son and the Spirit, fulfill his will, but they cannot be separate from God, otherwise the problem that Irenaeus wishes to avoid of the omnipotent God requiring something outside himself, yet equal, arises.

Irenaeus finds the equality and subordination of the Son to be the only way to preserve monotheism in light of the scriptural witness of creation and redemption. Scripture indicates that through his Word and Wisdom, God creates and redeems, which are tasks that only deity can do, and deity cannot be created.<sup>41</sup> While Irenaeus does not explicitly work out why this is so, the reason appears to center on his understanding that the fundamental purpose of God is self revelation and that all that God does is self revelation. Whether it be creation or redemption, because the act is self revelation of God, it must be done by God.

Thus, therefore, was God revealed; for God the Father is shown forth through all these [operations], the Spirit indeed working, and the Son ministering, while the Father was approving and man's salvation being accomplished.<sup>42</sup>

Though the revelation through creation and redemption is carried out in the economy, the Son is not a temporary position for the Word nor is this subordinationism. At one point, Irenaeus refers to the Word as "His offspring" and "the First-begotten"<sup>43</sup> using the term seemingly

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<sup>39</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 4.6.3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 4.38.3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 4.36.1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 4.20.6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ag. Heresies* 5.36.3.

interchangeably with Son. The two hands of God analogy brings the idea of the eternality of the Word as the Son out most clearly.

For God did not stand in need of these [beings], in order to the accomplishing of what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying, 'Let Us make man after Our image and likeness' ...<sup>44</sup>

The metaphor emphasizes that the Word and Wisdom are not separate beings from God, they are always present, they are always the Son and the Spirit, and they are under the Father's authority.

The Son is God, but He is God in a particular way consistent with being the Son. He is generated by the Father, yet eternal. He is God, yet subordinate. While one might wish that Irenaeus would explain how this can be, he does not do so.<sup>45</sup> Rather he accepts the revelation found in Scripture and focuses on why this must be. Scripture reveals a multiplicity in the one God and distinguishes with regards to origins and roles the three Persons. Scripture also reveals that God works through agents to do what only God can do, thus the agents must be God. If one wishes to argue that ingenerate is superior ontologically to eternally generated or free exercise of authority is superior to the free exercise of obedience, one would conclude that Irenaeus taught ontological subordination. If he did, it would be unintentional because he sees no conflict between God the Son being subordinate to God the Father. It would also be against his purpose of refuting Gnostic subordinationism that viewed the Son as ontologically inferior to the God.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ag. *Heresies* 4.20.1.

<sup>45</sup> Boris Bobrinskoy makes a similar point regarding Irenaeus' focus on the economic Trinity and his lack of speculation on the immanent. (*The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel, [Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Press, 1999], 204)

<sup>46</sup> Gunton, *Promise*, xxvi.

### Tertullian

In his defense of Christianity, Tertullian affirms belief in one God, the creator of all, who cannot be seen physically, is incomprehensible, and is beyond human thoughts. We can only perceive God, because in his grace he has manifested himself to us. The full manifestation of God, in a manner that humanity could perceive, was in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is both the commonality and the distinction between Christianity and Judaism. In monotheism, Christianity and Judaism are together separated from the polytheistic pagan religions of the world. But Christianity alone offers an understanding of the one God that allows for his transcendence and his immanence, thereby succeeding where Judaism had failed in being a light to all the world that would gather together a multinational kingdom of faithful followers of God. This success is not attributed to Christians *per se*, but to God who would choose and God who would appear among us “to renovate and illuminate man’s nature”.<sup>47</sup>

Tertullian distinguishes the Son of God from the offspring of the pagan gods by pointing to the Son’s source. Drawing from Logos Christology, he affirms that God created the world by the Logos, the Word that proceeds from God. In this procession, the Son is generated analogous to a ray proceeding from the sun. The point of the analogy is to clarify the unity and the distinction of Father and Son expressed in the statement “... that which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one ... He is made a second in manner of existence — in position, not in nature ...”<sup>48</sup> Throughout Tertullian maintains the equality of the Son with the Father and the subordination of the Son to the Father distinguishing between nature and position. The Son is an agent of God and yet is God. He proceeds from God and is

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<sup>47</sup> *The Apology* 21.

<sup>48</sup> *Apol.* 21.

God. The reason is quite clear. If the Son reveals the transcendent God fully and directly, the Son must be God.<sup>49</sup> The equality of substance is necessary so that the revelatory task can be completed, and the subordination maintains the transcendence of God the Father, who generates and sends but does not go.

Tertullian makes a similar argument in refuting monarchianism. In fact his argument relies on the unity of the substance and the subordination of the Son.

But as for me, who derive the Son from no other source but from the substance of the Father, and (represent Him) as doing nothing without the Father's will, and as having received all power from the Father, how can I be possibly destroying the Monarchy from the faith, when I preserve it in the Son just as it was committed to Him by the Father?<sup>50</sup>

In this statement, the deity and the subordination of the Son are expressed and the authority for this position is attributed to the faith as preserved from the teachings of Jesus. Tertullian seeks to retain the understanding of God the Father as monarch and the view that deity must reveal deity, which even his opponents affirm. These two thoughts lead the monarchians to modalism even though this is clearly against the distinctions of the divine Persons in Scripture. Where his opponents err is the failure to allow Scripture to define monarchy rather than using their definition of the term to interpret Scripture. Monarchy does not mean the Father cannot have a Son if the Son is of the same substance as the Father and has subordinated his will to the will of the Father. It is this radical unity of the Father and Son<sup>51</sup> and the willing obedience of the Son to the Father that maintains the monarchy and allows God to be revealed in a personal way to creation.

In light of later Trinitarian orthodox language, some of Tertullian's expressions if removed from the context of his arguments might seem to point to an ontological

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<sup>49</sup> *Apol.* 21.

<sup>50</sup> *Against Praxeas* 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ag. Praxeas* 3.

subordination.<sup>52</sup> As has been previously pointed out, Tertullian relies on the unity of substance to preserve the monarchy. He asks, “Do you really suppose that Those, who are naturally members of the Father’s own substance, pledges of His love, instruments of His might, nay, His power itself and the entire system of His monarchy, are the overthrow and destruction thereof?”<sup>53</sup> Yet in other places, he calls the Father “the entire substance” and the Son “a derivation of the whole”<sup>54</sup> and in one instance states that there was a time when the Son was not.<sup>55</sup> On the former matter, Tertullian is explaining the distinction of the Father and Son, clarifying by citing first Jesus’ statement “My Father is greater than I” and then defining the disparity in greatness, and thus the distinction, as the begetter and the begotten, the sender and the one sent, and the Creator and the agent of creation.

Regarding the eternality of the Son, Tertullian does hold to an economic generation or procession of the Son, but this must be taken within the context of his understanding of God. At some point in eternity, God must exist alone; otherwise there would be something or someone co-eternal. However, God is not a lonely monad because he always has within him “both Reason and, inherent in Reason, His Word, which He made second to Himself by agitating it within Himself.”<sup>56</sup> Though one might see in this statement, the generation of the Word and the Word depicted as a thing, in this same chapter, Tertullian writes that although the Word had not been sent out yet, God “still had *Him* within Himself, both in company with and included within His very Reason, ...”<sup>57</sup> Though the eternality of the Son is not affirmed, the eternality and personhood of the Word is. The scriptural support for this thought appears to be from the

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<sup>52</sup> This is not unexpected, because Tertullian (as Heron notes) is patterning his understanding of the relationship of the Father and Son on Tatian’s. (Heron, 57)

<sup>53</sup> *Ag. Praxeas* 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ag. Praxeas* 9.

<sup>55</sup> *Against Hemogenes* 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ag. Praxeas* 5. Again, despite the language here, the Word is not an “it” and is always with the Father in Tertullian’s thought. See chapter 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Ag. Praxeas* 5. Emphasis added.

Johannine prologue.<sup>58</sup> The substance of the Son is eternal, but the generation of the Son is not, or as George Bull concludes, the substance is eternal, but the titles are not.<sup>59</sup> This is a distinction that Tertullian himself makes in his writing against Hemogenes, who teaches the eternality of matter. “God” refers to the divine substance, but “Lord”, “Judge”, and “Father” are titles indicating relationships between God and creation, sin, and the Son respectively.<sup>60</sup>

Like the church fathers before him, Tertullian is holding to the deity and subordination of the Son. He finds this taught in Scripture by Jesus himself and makes no attempt to explain it, indicating that he did not see this as a potential contradiction. There is only one God, and this one God is identified most closely in Scripture with the transcendent Father, who, through the agency of His Son and Spirit, creates and reveals himself to those he creates. Only God can reveal God, thus only a Trinitarian God can be simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Subordination of the Son is not a secondary thought but tied to the distinction of the Son from the Father. The Son is begotten, and the Father begets. The Father sends, and the Son goes.

### **Origen of Alexandria**

The orthodoxy of Origen has been much debated throughout the centuries in the church with some denouncing Origen outright as a heretic and others viewing his theology as a well-intentioned, yet flawed attempt to express Christian doctrine in a coherent system.<sup>61</sup> The Middle Platonism in his theology has been well-documented and cause for some to dismiss his theology altogether. However, Origen’s theology and the reaction to his theology can provide insights into

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<sup>58</sup> Ag. *Praxeas* 21.

<sup>59</sup> A. Cleveland Coxe, “Elucidations”, Ag. *Praxeas*, ANF, vol. 3, 629.

<sup>60</sup> Ag. *Hemogenes* 3.

<sup>61</sup> G. W. Butterworth, preface to *Origen: On First Principles*, (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), liv.

not only his views, but also what has been considered orthodoxy at different points in church history.

The difficulties with understanding Origen's theology begin with the difficulty of knowing exactly what he taught. The earliest extant version of his most comprehensive work, *On First Principles*, was corrupted by the translator Rufinus, who admits in the preface to amending the text where he thought Origen strayed from orthodoxy. Additional sources of Origen's thought are found in the writings of his opponents, which can lead to the opposite problem of focusing only on what provides evidence that Origen was heretical. His other extant works are also important sources, and *Against Celsus*, one of his last major works, will be used here along with *On First Principles*.

Regarding the Trinity, Origen holds to the orthodoxy of one God in Three Persons, the distinction of the Persons, the eternality of the Persons, and their scriptural names of Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father is co-eternal with the Son and Spirit, but the Father clearly has priority over the other two. The Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father's substance and not from some other substance or matter. In line with his predecessors, he is a proponent of Logos theology and the identification of God in Scripture as primarily referring to the Father. Origen errs when he begins to explain the divine mystery often speculating from logic and philosophy where the Scripture and the church had been silent. His system can be criticized for its errors, inconsistent use of important terminology, and speculative nature, but some of the criticism results from those who followed, whether friend or foe, who did not hold his views together either attacking or using out of context what Origen had taught. For example, Arians would adopt some of Origen's ideas or concepts, such as the priority of the Father and the creatureliness

of the Son, and reject the eternality of the Son and the Spirit<sup>62</sup> and the inseparable relationship of the divine Persons.<sup>63</sup> Origen uses the word “created” with regards to the Son, as the Arians did, but it is not with the same meaning because Origen had already established that this generation is eternal within the Godhead and the Son is generated from the same substance as the Father. However, it is this imprecise use of language, which would be refined by the church in the next century that contributes to the misuse and misunderstanding of his theology.

As stated above, Origen begins his theology with the priority of God the Father, who is utterly transcendent, incomprehensible, invisible, and immeasurable. The Father is incorporeal and cannot be seen by anyone, including the Son, in the physical sense, not because of limitations on the part of the viewer, but because of the spiritual nature of the Father. He can be known, perceived, or understood by the Son but not seen.<sup>64</sup> This is an important point for Origen, because it distinguishes between Father and Son in a way beyond the ingenerate and generate distinction that he also believes. God the Father is “simple intellectual existence”,<sup>65</sup> a transcendent, universal mind, and his Word, who is personal and eternal, is the expression of his thoughts within himself and to creation through which he exercises dominion overall. The Word is the connection between the transcendent God and his creation. The Platonic influences are obvious here, but so too is the influence of Scripture, for example Colossians 1:15 and the Johannine prologue.<sup>66</sup>

The eternal generation of the Son, who is the Word, and the Son as from the substance of God provide the context for Origen’s views regarding the Son. “... God was always Father of his

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<sup>62</sup> Butterworth, xxxii.

<sup>63</sup> Hanson details the similarities and differences between Origen’s and Arius’ theologies. (63-70)

<sup>64</sup> *On First Principles* 1.1.3-7. This work is a parallel English translation using Rufinus and a partial recreation of the Greek from manuscript evidence found in the works of others who criticized Origen’s beliefs. The purpose is to attempt to show Rufinus’ glosses and provide a translation closer to the original. See also *Ag. Celsus*, 7.38.

<sup>65</sup> *On First Principles* 1.1.6.

<sup>66</sup> *On First Principles* 1.1.8.



only-begotten Son, who was born indeed of him and draws his being from him, but is yet without any beginning”.<sup>67</sup> The Son shares with the Father eternity and substance. He is not to be categorized with creation, which is made from a substance other than God. The Father-Son relationship is eternal, though one should not see “begotten” in human terms, but more “as brightness is begotten from light”<sup>68</sup> and therefore inseparable and part of the very character of light. The word “image” reinforces this idea emphasizing the unity of nature and substance between the Father and Son. By subordinating the Logos Christology to one based on the eternal Son as the image of the Father, Origen is able to overcome the earlier theology’s difficulties in explaining how the Logos could be similar yet distinct from God in such a way that God is still unchanging.<sup>69</sup> A second analogy is used here of the relationship of an act of the will and the mind, which also does not imply a separation between the two.<sup>70</sup>

Within this context, Origen makes statements that subordinate the Son in a manner that he considered orthodox but would be used in accusing him of heresy and by heretics to argue against the orthodox position. For example, Jerome quotes Origen as writing that “The Son, who is the image of the invisible Father, is not the truth when compared with the Father . . . .”<sup>71</sup> The language clearly is unscriptural and betrays the underlying and at times overriding Middle Platonism in his thought. The Father is truth in the truest sense, but he cannot be comprehended by any but the Son. The need for divine condescension stems from the limitations of humanity

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<sup>67</sup> *On First Principles* 1.2.2.

<sup>68</sup> *On First Principles* 1.2.5. Origen is referencing Heb. 1:3.

<sup>69</sup> Heron, 59-60. Heron adds that Origen’s theology is still subordinationist and leaves open the possibility that the Son could be categorized as created because creation is also eternal. As will be discussed, Athanasius overcomes this problem.

<sup>70</sup> *On First Principles* 1.2.6.

<sup>71</sup> *On First Principles* 1.2.6, (p. 20) fn. 1. Rufinus does not include this statement in his translation, thus judging it also to be heretical language. In note 3, Jerome cites other passages in which Origen calls the Father “light incomprehensible” and Christ “a very small brightness” and where he compares the difference between Peter and Paul and Christ with the difference between the Son and the Father.

and the unchanging nature of God.<sup>72</sup> The Son presents the truth to humanity, and he is the best presentation of truth that humanity can grasp, but He is only “a shadow and semblance of the truth”.<sup>73</sup> This is consistent with Origen’s overall thought. The Son’s role is to reveal the incomprehensible Father to humanity, thus defining his unique purpose in the Godhead. There is no need for the Son if the Father can otherwise be perceived by creation. If the Son simply presents the incomprehensible Father as the Father is, that accomplishes nothing because the Father would still be incomprehensible. This is not a denigration of the Son, but who the Son is so that the limited ability of humanity to comprehend the incomprehensible can at least partially be overcome.<sup>74</sup>

There is some question as to whether Origen intended this limitation to refer to the Son in the incarnation or in eternity. In his explanation of the kenosis, he illustrates the point with an analogy of a big and small statue. The big statue fills the whole world and cannot be perceived, so a smaller and otherwise exact statue is made that can be perceived. With caution against pressing the analogy too far, Origen explains that this is a way of understanding the Son “emptying himself of his equality with his Father”.<sup>75</sup> This implies that prior to the incarnation, the Son is equal to the Father, but the Son became less in certain respects to meet humanity’s limited ability to know God. The heretical language cited previously by Jerome when taken in this context is Origen’s attempt to express the purpose and the necessity of the incarnation of the Son and not a statement supporting the ontological inferiority of the Son to the Father. This appears to be his argument, but it is not surprising that his language would be controversial.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ag. Celsus* 4.14.

<sup>73</sup> *On First Principles* 1.2.6 (p. 20), fn. 1. See also *Ag. Celsus* 4.15, 6.17, 7.42.

<sup>74</sup> *Ag. Celsus* 6.65.

<sup>75</sup> *On First Principles* 1.2.8.

Although the previous statements likely were describing the incarnation, Origen does see hierarchy in the Trinity that comes primarily from his belief that the Father is the source of deity<sup>76</sup> and as such is the one who is God in the fullest sense of the word. He does this in support of his belief that salvation is impossible without the Trinity and that to prove that the particular roles and activities of Father, Son, and Spirit must be defined. The Father is superior to all other beings because he is the source of their existence with the Son being less and superior only to rational creatures and the Spirit even less dwelling only in the saints. This gradation is a reflection of their power.<sup>77</sup> Because Rufinus' translation is corrupted, it is difficult to know fully Origen's reasoning. In *Against Celsus*, Origen answers the charge that Christians teach the Son is greater than God by saying that "the Son is not mightier than the Father, but inferior to Him."<sup>78</sup> The source of this is the teaching of Jesus regarding the superiority of the Father. The Son is God and has dominion over all things that have been subjected to him except the Father who is the ruler of all. Although these statements could be read with an orthodox interpretation,<sup>79</sup> they could also be interpreted as teaching an ontological subordination. Even if the Son is eternal and of the same substance of the Father, he is not just inferior in terms of role, but inferior in his being. The distinction of the Father as the source of all beings makes him not only different, but superior to the Son and Spirit. The Son is God, which John 1:1, clearly states, but the Son is not God in the same way that the Father is God. However, this difference does not necessarily imply inequality for Origen, who seems to hold that the Son is God in an equal but different way that is essential for the overall deity to be complete.

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<sup>76</sup> *On First Principles* 1.3.7.

<sup>77</sup> *On First Principles* 1.3.5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ag. Celsus* 8.15.

<sup>79</sup> *On First Principles* 1.3.5, (pp. 33-34), fn 6.

In his defense of Christianity against Celsus, Origen also refers to the Son as a “second God”,<sup>80</sup> which suggests not only subordination, but also polytheism if not held within his overall teaching that there is only one God and that the Son is the wisdom and righteousness of the Father. To call the Son “second God” is not to denigrate, but to exalt the Son as the full expression of God, and in that sense, God himself. He writes later in this same work, “We worship one God, the Father and the Son, ...”<sup>81</sup> citing the oneness and mutual indwelling statements of Jesus found in the Gospel of John. The use of the term “second God” is his way to show the distinction between Father and Son – they are one God, but they are distinct with one being the source and the second being the full expression of the source. The Son must be God for God to be able to descend to humanity and accomplish his purposes here without vacating his position even temporarily.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, to be begotten or to beget does not denigrate the Son or the Father because of the excellence of the Son and the nature of the begetting as a natural outflow (e.g., as light from the sun).<sup>83</sup>

This understanding is further developed in the teaching that the Father sends and commands the Son, and the Son willingly obeys. This is not simply the Son as Jesus obeying the Father, but the Word obeying as the earthly Jesus as he obeyed in the creation of the world.<sup>84</sup> In the Father-Son relationship there are clearly two wills with the Son voluntarily aligning his will with the Father’s. This subjection is not just from the beginning or temporary but extends to the eschaton as found in 1 Corinthians 15:28 when “the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.”

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<sup>80</sup> Ag. *Celsus* 5.39.

<sup>81</sup> Ag. *Celsus* 8.12

<sup>82</sup> Ag. *Celsus* 4.15.

<sup>83</sup> Ag. *Celsus* 8.14.

<sup>84</sup> Ag. *Celsus* 2.9.

... the subjection of Christ to the Father reveals the blessedness of our perfection and announces the crowning glory of the work undertaken by him, since he offers to the Father not only the sum total of all ruling and reigning which he has amended throughout the entire universe but also the laws, corrected and renewed, of the obedience and subjection due from the human race.<sup>85</sup>

The point of God's work is his rule and this requires submission to that rule. Although from the human perspective subjection is viewed negatively, it is ideal if the subjection is to the loving, omnipotent, omniscient God of the universe. The Son is the divine example of subjection, and the salvation of humanity depends on his obedience and following his example by bringing our lives in subjection to God. The converse is to argue that being subject is bad and thus could have no place in deity, even temporarily, and ultimately authority must be evil. But a view of the Son, being God, aligning his will with the Father demonstrates that authority and subjection are eternally a part of the Godhead and within that context good and not a sign of inequality. Only God, who is Trinity, holds both of these together.

Origen's soteriology is connected to his overall theology. Like his predecessors, he defends the justice of God removing any sense of divine responsibility for sin or evil. To do so, the will must be emphasized. Though God created the will, he does not control it, which means rational creatures bear the responsibility for the world's predicaments. In his grace, God redeems the world but not in such a way as to circumvent or override the will, which would again open him up to being culpable for evil in the world. Rather the Son comes primarily to reveal who God truly is and to teach humanity how to relate to God properly. Knowledge of God is the key to salvation, but God the Father is incomprehensible to humanity, thus, he must be revealed via the Son, who is the Word. Over time, as we learn who the Father is through the Son, we are transformed and become more like God. Humanity partners with God by learning and living a virtuous life. Therefore, it is knowledge of God and the enacting of our will in accordance with

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<sup>85</sup> *On First Principles* 3.5.7.

God's will that leads to salvation.<sup>86</sup> There is a connection between mind, thoughts, and action that is paralleled in Origen's view of God. It is inconceivable for the Universal Mind to be without his thoughts, the Logos, and inconceivable for those thoughts not to be translated into activity. For God, what he thinks is who he is and what he does is who he is, thus there is a Trinity of equal, inseparable Persons because the quality of the thoughts and activities are as good and perfect as their source, God himself. Likewise, the quality of the human mind is judged by what it thinks and the quality of the thoughts by the resulting activity. Knowledge can improve the human mind thereby improving the thoughts and activity. Therefore, the knowledge of God can transform completely.<sup>87</sup>

Consistent with the church fathers who preceded him, Origen teaches that the Son is equal to the Father in substance but subordinate regarding role. Both the equality and subordination are essential to the redemption of the world. The significance of the equality is that the Son's purpose is to reveal the Father, as light reveals its source, and this is impossible unless the Son is from the same substance as the Father. Only by knowing the Father can humanity be saved. Likewise, the subordination of the Son cannot be foreign to the Godhead, added only after the incarnation. His obedience demonstrates eternally the relationship that all should have as subjects in God's kingdom. The result of a deeper knowledge of God will necessarily be obedience. The lack of precision in Origen's words that later theology would have is troubling, but the criticism of Origen from others in the church was not because of the subordinate role of the Son. Rather, Jerome is opposed to expressions that indicate ontological subordination, for example in Origen's use of the word "created", which Rufinus also rejects by changing to

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<sup>86</sup> *On First Principles* 3.1.24.

<sup>87</sup> The emphasis on knowledge as the key to salvation is a constant theme throughout Origen's work. See *Ag. Celsus* 6.46, 8.5, 8.9-10.

“begotten”.<sup>88</sup> Origen apparently did not distinguish between the two terms the way that later theologians would, but the overall context of his teaching demonstrates that he did not believe the Son or the Spirit was created as though there was a time when they did not exist. Both Jerome and Rufinus view as heresy Origen’s gradation of power and influence in the Godhead as has been discussed above. If Origen saw any potential error here, it was not in understanding that the Father or Son was superior, but that the Spirit was superior because the Spirit was exclusively concerned with the saints and the Father and Son with the good and evil.<sup>89</sup> He clarifies by stating that he is referring to the special activities or ministries of each Person in the divine plan. The Father gives existence, the Word gives the rational nature, and the Spirit gives holiness. All three work as one, holy Trinity constantly renewing humanity to become perfect.<sup>90</sup> Rufinus does not object to the distinction of roles nor does he see ontological subordination as the prerequisite for the roles.

### Arius

While Origen’s subordinationism could be a problem with language and context, the subordinationism found in Arius’ theology is much more than a matter of semantics. The presbyter from Baucalis in Alexandria clearly taught that the Son was created *ex nihilo* and thus a lesser deity. With a desire to defend the monarchy of the Father against the threat of modalism and to prevent the Father from being seen as having human experience as well as a flawed soteriology,<sup>91</sup> Arius failed to see that the deity of the Son was essential to the redemptive

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<sup>88</sup> *On First Principles* Book I preface, (p. 3), fns. 1 and 4.

<sup>89</sup> *On First Principles* 1.3.7.

<sup>90</sup> *On First Principles* 1.3.8.

<sup>91</sup> Contrary to Prestige’s position that Arius did not have soteriological emphases, Hanson believes a letter by Constantine suggests otherwise. Divine suffering was required for salvation, but suffering was not proper to the Father. The Son fulfilled this role. Hanson also looks favorably upon the work of Gregg and Groh, who see soteriology as key to understanding Arius and Arianism. (Hanson, 25)

purposes of God. The ensuing battle was not simply a debate over how to conceive of God, but one that would have serious consequences for the fundamental understanding of what it meant to be a Christian.

Very little of Arius' writings survive and are found primarily in the form of two letters and quotations of his major work *Thalia* found in Athanasius' polemic against him. In addition, R. P. C. Hanson notes that Arians rarely cited Arius.<sup>92</sup> The letters corroborate the accusations against Arius made by Athanasius and others although they do not provide sufficient supporting details of his views or how he arrived at them. They also point out where his arguments run afoul of orthodoxy and how his defense of God becomes an attack on God.

Arius begins where Origen and others before him began with the priority of God the Father. It was illogical to believe that the Father could be the one God and the Son could also be God. This leads either to the polytheism of the pagan world or modalism, which Scripture clearly taught against and led to numerous other problems. The only rational understanding was the monotheism that Scripture taught regarding the one, supreme God. Only the Father could be called God in this sense, therefore the Son, if he were divine, must be so in a lesser sense. Arius rejects the beliefs of the co-eternality of Father and Son and the Son being from God's substance, both of which according to his letter to Eusebius were the position of the bishop Alexander.<sup>93</sup> Apparently rejecting the analogies of light and source and mind and thought, Arius understood the word "begotten" as time and space contingent. Therefore the begotten must come after the begetter and must result in a movement of substance from one source to another. God could not

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<sup>92</sup> Hanson, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia*, (Rusch, 29-30).



be divided, which meant the source must be other than God. The only conclusion then is “The Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning” and “He (the Son) is from nothing”.<sup>94</sup>

In his letter to Alexander, Arius clarifies his views in an attempt to express them as close to orthodoxy as possible without compromising what he believes to be truth about God. By placing the begetting outside of time, the Son was distinguished from creation, which was created in time. He maintained, however, that the Father is the only one who is truly eternal because he is the only one who is unbegotten. While begetting could be freed from time as an experience in creation, it could not be done so as time in the sense of sequence. That is why Arius could make the contradictory statements that the Son was begotten timelessly and “was not before he was begotten”.<sup>95</sup> What Arius failed to understand or accept was that words that imply time for finite creation do not necessarily imply time for infinite God. Astutely rejecting a purely economic Trinity whether modalism or one closer to orthodoxy, he could not accept the eternal generation of the Son by the Father, which Origen held, leaving only the belief that God the Father is the only God and all other beings are created by him from nothing. Without the eternal generation of the Son, the subordination of the Son lost its mooring and expectedly drifted away from Christianity toward the paganism Arius sought to avoid.<sup>96</sup>

Arius also argued that begetting means God can be divided, which is proper for corporeal beings but not for incorporeal God.<sup>97</sup> Again Arius takes a word that when applied to the corporeal would usually mean a division but cannot see how the word will be transformed when applied to God. Applying finite language to the infinite will never be precise. Beings with bodies generate offspring by separating, but this does not apply in the same way to God who is spirit.

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<sup>94</sup> *Letter to Eusebius.*

<sup>95</sup> Arius, *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria*, (Rusch, 32).

<sup>96</sup> Kelly, 231.

<sup>97</sup> *Letter to Alexander.*

Furthering the difficulty of defending Arius' position were the various analogies, which Origen and others used, where source and effect are perceived as inseparable. In his letter to Alexander, Arius makes no attempt to explain this position, asserting it as being self evident.

By rejecting that divine begetting could be eternal and does not necessarily mean separation, Arius believed that all other positions contradicted the fundamental truth that there is only one God clearly identified as the Father in Scripture. Although he might attempt to reword his beliefs, he could not compromise them because of this truth. By making this his starting point, his theology is doomed to be non-Christian from the beginning. The starting point for Christian theology is the cross of Jesus Christ as his finished work and as experienced by the community of faith. This is the consistent witness of the New Testament as well as the early church fathers, including Origen, who saw proof of the deity of the Son in the impact of Christ's ministry on the world.<sup>98</sup> Starting with belief in one God, the Pharisee Saul could not see the truth until encountering the risen Savior thereby transforming his life and theology accordingly. Only the cross reveals the Trinity, because only the Trinity could have provided salvation through the cross. Only those who have joined the fellowship of the cross can truly know the Trinity.

This is not to say that Arius and the Arians who followed him did not have a soteriological concern. Hanson believes that soteriology is central to Arianism and that the chief source of this understanding is not philosophy or paganism, but the Bible.<sup>99</sup> After rejecting the views of earlier scholars that did not see the key role of soteriology, Hanson draws from the recent works of Gregg and Groh and Williams to demonstrate the soteriological centrality of Arianism. Seeing Stoicism as influential, Gregg and Groh find an Arian soteriology teaching salvation through moral progress by following the example of Jesus. Although Williams does not

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<sup>98</sup> Ag. *Celsus* 2.78.

<sup>99</sup> Hanson, 98.

believe soteriology is central to Arianism, Hanson sees the grounds for soteriology in Williams' focus on the Arians' distinction, which he sees as Aristotelian, between participation of the Son (which they accepted) and consubstantiality (which they rejected).<sup>100</sup> Arius's heresy stems in part from his error in seeing one part of salvation<sup>101</sup> and mistaking it for the whole. There was also a concern to defend the impassible Father from the divine suffering required for salvation. This suffering that was improper to the Father was not improper for the Son, who could experience it because he was a lesser God.<sup>102</sup>

Alexander of Alexandria is Arius' main opponent initially, and his response to the Arian threat reveals what the church considered the critical issues. The overriding concern in Alexander's letter to Alexander of Thessalonica is the deity of the Son, assailed by Arius's teachings on the Son's creation *ex nihilo* and mutability. It does not appear that the differing roles of the Father and Son are of any concern. Arius and others viewed Scripture that expressed the suffering, humbling, poverty or emptying of Christ as evidence against the divinity of the Son. Apparently not seeing any contradiction, Alexander counters only with Scripture that indicates Christ's glory and oneness with the Father.<sup>103</sup> When Alexander quotes "My Father is greater than I", he uses it as evidence that Jesus taught that he was the "exact and identical" image of the Father. The only distinction is between the unbegottenness of the Father and the Son's "generation without beginning from the Father".<sup>104</sup> While Alexander's interpretation of John 14:28 is suspect, he is clearly refuting Arius on ontological subordination and not the subordination of divine roles.

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<sup>100</sup> Hanson, 89, 95-96.

<sup>101</sup> 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6.

<sup>102</sup> Hanson, 25. Hanson is using a letter from Constantine as his source.

<sup>103</sup> Alexander, *Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica* (Rusch, 38).

<sup>104</sup> *Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica* (Rusch, 42-43).

### Athanasius of Alexandria

In his defense of the deity of the Son against Arianism and other heresies of his day, Athanasius's starting point is the crucial link between soteriology and the nature of God. What Christ accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection and the subsequent effects these had had led true believers to the only possible conclusion, that the Son is God. A lower view of the Son could only be held if one had a lower view of salvation. The debate over the deity of the Son and his ὁμοούσιος with the Father was not mere metaphysical hairsplitting, but a necessary defense of true salvation and thus true Christianity. In discussing his relevant views, this section will examine his early work *Against the Heathen*, his work on the incarnation, and his later major works written against Arianism.

The end of salvation is deification and eternal fellowship with God,<sup>105</sup> which is the completion of his creative process and thus the solution to the divine dilemma. The purpose of creation is the revelation of God. God had created humanity, who was by nature mortal, in the image of God to be immortal. But through disobedience, humanity lost the knowledge of God, their source of being, and was doomed to the mortal state and eventually non-being.<sup>106</sup> This willful rebellion threatened to thwart God's purposes for creation, especially for those who had been created in the image of God. Even if God wanted to destroy humanity or allow humanity to destroy itself, he would not because that would mean going against his own purpose and would be a sign of weakness as though he could not accomplish what he set out to do. Because God had given his law and decreed that to break it meant death, he could not simply forgive.<sup>107</sup> It is God's honor and true revelation of who he is that is at stake. The solution is not to do nothing or to

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<sup>105</sup> *Ag. Heathen*, 1.2.2.

<sup>106</sup> *On the Incarnation* 3.3-4, 4.4-6.

<sup>107</sup> *On the Incarnation* 6.2.

restore creation through mere repentance, but to recreate by deifying humanity and this is a task that could only be done by God.<sup>108</sup>

Deification is the imparting of divine life from God to humanity. For God the Father to have first deified the Son, who would in turn deify humanity, is at best senseless and in Athanasius's mind impossible. The Son, if deified by the Father, cannot give what is truly required because he is not ὁμοούσιος with the Father. "For by partaking of Him, we partake of the Father; because that the Word is the Father's own."<sup>109</sup> If the Son is not from the Father's essence, he cannot provide this connection between humanity and God. In addition, the Son is superfluous to deification if the Father can directly deify something he creates. Like Origen and many of the Eastern fathers, Athanasius believes that the Father, who is invisible, cannot be perceived fully by humanity. This must occur through the work of the Word, who revealed God in part through creation but fully in the incarnation. God cannot be fully revealed by anyone less than God, therefore the Son must be God to accomplish this revelatory task.<sup>110</sup>

Deification is not becoming God, but becoming like God as redeemed human nature allows through a process of molding and learning, which in large part means being united with each other and God.<sup>111</sup> Through faith in Jesus Christ and the subsequent indwelling work of the Holy Spirit, redeemed humanity is "knit into the Godhead"<sup>112</sup> experiencing the mutual indwelling that John writes about in 1 John 4:13-15. This high soteriology distinguishes Athanasius's theology not just from the Arian view, but also from others who had come before.

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<sup>108</sup> *On the Incarnation* 7.4-5.

<sup>109</sup> *On the Synods* 3.51.

<sup>110</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.22.81. *Ag. Heathens* 3.35.1.

<sup>111</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.25.20. Being God and being like God are two distinctly different ideas for Athanasius as his preference of ὁμοούσιος over ὁμοιούσιος demonstrated. To Athanasius, likeness means "like by participation" and not of essence. He uses 1 John 3:2 as an example. (*Synods* 3.53) He does state that the Son "was made man that we might be made God", but the greater context of his teaching provides the proper understanding of this statement. (*On the Incarnation* 54.3)

<sup>112</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.25.24.

The Word did not become flesh merely as an example or model as the Arians believed nor did he come just to save or to instruct.<sup>113</sup> All of these are good, but they can only create another Garden of Eden scenario where sin will eventually return. Instead, the Son came to transform humanity through deification so that the mutual indwelling with the divine, for which man was created, could occur and this intimate community could be established forever.<sup>114</sup> It is not merely forgiveness or the settlement of debt required for this community, but a recreation, the giving of eternal life in community with God.<sup>115</sup> This could only be accomplished by God directly and not by a created agent.

The incarnation of the Word is as necessary for deification as are the cross and resurrection. By becoming human, the divine Word deifies human nature for all although the deification must be appropriated individually through faith<sup>116</sup> and develops over time. God could not simply speak again as he did in creation, because this was recreation and required removal of sin that was internal to creation.<sup>117</sup> In addition, more words would simply be missed or misinterpreted by humanity that had been blinded to God's previous revelations through creation, the law, and the prophets. God himself must come, not to reveal truth about God, but to reveal God. He must come as man so that he could meet them in their existence, and only then would they perceive him as God the Word when he did what no man could do.<sup>118</sup> The life of Christ is also important, because through this process each part of human existence, even death, is deified, because each part of human existence had been affected by sin.<sup>119</sup> This is one part of the twofold mediating role of the Incarnate Word, who offers all that it means to be human,

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<sup>113</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.21.65

<sup>114</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.21.68-69. This is Athanasius's improvement on Origen's eschatology that would have humanity simply return to a pre-Fall.

<sup>115</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.25.24.

<sup>116</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.22.81.

<sup>117</sup> *On the Incarnation* 7.4.

<sup>118</sup> *On the Incarnation* 13.2-7; 14.4-6; 16.4-5.

<sup>119</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.36.33. "... He deified that which He put on." (1.11.42)

especially our suffering, to the Father so that these sufferings might be nullified. In the second part, the Son receives from the Father power and exaltation, not because he was lacking these which he possessed as God, but so that humanity could receive these gifts from the Father through the Son.<sup>120</sup> The deification of the human experience of death is the lifting of death as a curse demonstrated in the resurrection.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, the debt of sin has been paid, the curse has been lifted, and divine life has been given that allows redeemed humanity to live in a right relationship with God. A creature is incapable of this, because he is giving that which he does not truly possess or have the right to give. Only a creator God can accomplish salvation in this sense to this degree.<sup>122</sup>

While the deification of all human nature through the uniting of the divine and human in Christ is metaphysical, what it looks or feels like according to Scripture is a loving community of faith. In 1 John 4:13-15, the Holy Spirit allows the mutual indwelling of God and all who confess Jesus as the Son of God. The subsequent experience of this confession of faith is love. “And the work is perfected because men, redeemed from sin, no longer remain dead; but being deified, have in each other, by looking at Me, the bond of charity.”<sup>123</sup> An image and an example are useful, but transformation is required. Deification is transformation, but it requires growth and learning with the results being a greater knowledge of God and a stronger unity of divine love.

In support of the deity of the Son, Athanasius, as Origen before him, believes in the eternal generation of the Son. The reasoning begins with the evident eternity of the Son, who is the Word, Truth, and Wisdom of God. It is inconceivable that God should ever be without these.

... whereas God is, He was eternally; since then the Father is ever, His Radiance ever is, which is His Word. And again, God who is, hath from Himself His Word who also is;

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<sup>120</sup> *Ag. Arians* 4.6-7. See also 3.27.38-40. Athanasius includes ignorance in what Christ assumed. (3.27.37).

<sup>121</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.69. *On the Incarnation* 1.8.4; 1.9.1-2.

<sup>122</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.21.70. *Synods* 3.51. *On the Incarnation* 20.

<sup>123</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.25.23.

and neither hath the Word been added, whereas He was not before, nor was the Father once without Reason.<sup>124</sup>

The underlying analogy here, as it is in much of Athanasius' thought, is that of light as a source and light as an emission. A true source of light by nature gives off light and should it cease, it ceases to be a source of light. Likewise, a light emitted ceases to exist when the source is shut off or blocked. The two are both light and inseparable with each serving a specific role. The Father is the sole origin or source, and the Son is the revealing radiance of the Father. As the source, the Father generates the Son not as an act of will, but because it is his nature to do so.<sup>125</sup> Because the Son is an act of the eternal nature of the Father, this generation is eternal. Added to that is the understanding of the emission as the Logos, the Word and Reason of God, which would render God mindless or without reason prior to the generation of the Son. The eternal name of God as Father is defended with the argument that if it is good to be the Father and at some point he was not the Father, there must be some point when he was not good.<sup>126</sup> The significance of the ὁμοούσιος and the support for it hinges on the eternal generation of the Son. Unlike Origen, Athanasius identifies eternity as an exclusive characteristic of deity. Thus, if the Son is from the Father's substance, he must be eternal for only God is eternal, and, conversely, if the Son is eternal, he must be from the Father's substance and must be God.<sup>127</sup>

The Father as the one source must be maintained to prevent polytheism, in which there are two or more sources, or subordination of the Father and Son to another source from which they derive their essence.<sup>128</sup> Although it is the Father's nature and not his will that generates the Son, the Father's will is operative in all that the Son does and the perichoretic unity of Father and

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<sup>124</sup> *Ag. Arians* 1.7.25. See a similar statement regarding truth 1.6.20.

<sup>125</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.62, 66.

<sup>126</sup> *Ag. Arians* 1.8.28.

<sup>127</sup> *Ag. Arians* 1.8.29.

<sup>128</sup> *Synods* 3.51. *Ag. Arians* 3.25.13, 4.3-4.



Son prevents any notion of rivalry from the one who came to glorify and reveal the Father.<sup>129</sup> In one instance, Athanasius calls the Word the Father's Will, not to personify the will, but to describe the unity of Father and Son as such that whatever the Father wills, the Son does with no discussion.<sup>130</sup> The Son's purpose in coming is so that through him humanity might worship and honor the Father.<sup>131</sup> The Father sends and charges the Son with the works of creation and redemption, and the Son does the will of the Father as Jesus indicates in John 6:38-40.<sup>132</sup> There is only one source, the Father, and there is only one Word from that source, the Son. Although the unity of the Father and Son is such that they share in all the works, it is never said that the Father does the will of the Son or the Word or is sent by the Son or the Word. They are God, but their roles distinguish them. In the economy, this is manifested in numerous ways whereas within the Godhead this is seen in the Father as source and the Son as generated as radiance from a light.<sup>133</sup>

The ὁμοούσιος of the Son with the Father and the subordinate role of the Son to the Father are integral to Athanasius's soteriology. As stated earlier, what the Son assumed in humanity, he deified it and to do so he must possess divinity so that he can give it. But for the incarnation to occur, the Son humbled himself and became obedient unto death on a cross. Arguing from Philippians 2:5-11, the Arians contended that this proved the inferiority of the Son because he advanced through his life and was rewarded with exaltation. Athanasius argues from

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<sup>129</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.25.12; 3.24.7. Athanasius sees nature as superior to will and uses this understanding to distinguish between begetting and creating. The Father is by nature Father and begets the Son eternally as his Father. However, he creates by will. (See Panachiotis Christou, "Uncreated and Created, Unbegotten and Begotten in the Theology of Athanasius of Alexandria", in *Doctrines of God and Christ in the Early Church*, 60-61) Athanasius can then refute Origen's belief in the eternality of matter without losing Origen's important contribution of the eternal generation of the Son.

<sup>130</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.28.31. Prestige notes that by identifying the Son with the Father's will, Athanasius is refuting the Arian belief that the Son is an act of the Father's will. (*God in Patristic Thought*, [London: S. P. C. K., 1956], 150)

<sup>131</sup> *Ag. Arians* 3.23.6.

<sup>132</sup> *Ag. Arians* 2.20.52. See also 2.14.7. Athanasius calls the Son the hand of God to demonstrate the unity and the distinction between Father and Son. (*Ag. Arians* 2.21.71)

<sup>133</sup> At least early in his life, Athanasius viewed the chief source, or cause, to be nobler than the light itself. This thought seems to be in the background of his writings throughout his life. (*Ag. Heathens*, 1.1)

the same passage and the greater context of Scripture the opposite position. In John 17, Jesus prayed for the glory that he had before the world, and in John 1, the Word is proclaimed as God. The Philippians passage interpreted in this context demonstrates that all that the Son receives, he already possesses and that if it is spoken as being received in Scripture, it refers to what he received as a human being. If he is humbled as a man, the Son can also be exalted as the passage declares. Though Athanasius limits the terms “humbled” and “exalted” in this passage to the human nature of Jesus, he refers to the Son humbling himself, descending from heaven, and taking the form of a servant.<sup>134</sup> It is not human nature that causes the Son to be humble, anymore than human nature causes the Son to be exalted. But in humbling himself, the Son enters a humble estate from which he will be exalted. In Athanasius’ understanding, this is the will of the Father willfully accomplished by the Son.

In his strident defense of orthodoxy against Arian subordinationism, Athanasius equates Godhood with ὁμοούσιος and not with roles or activities. From his light analogy, he is consistent with identifying the Father as the source or the first cause and the Son as the inseparable, eternal emission. The Son makes visible the invisible Father through creation first and then through the incarnation, but he does so as the hand of God<sup>135</sup> at the will of the Father. And though it is rightly said because of the perichoretic union, all that the Son does the Father does, it cannot be said all who the Father is the Son is for the Son will never be the source or first cause. As the Arians erred by conceiving of generation in temporal and human terms, the same error should not be made with regards to the roles of Father and Son. It is the role of the Father to be the eternal source of the Son and for the Son to be the eternal radiance of the Father. There is

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<sup>134</sup> “... that it might be plain that ‘humbled’ and ‘exalted’ are spoken of His human nature ...” (*Ag. Arians*, 1.11.38-41)

<sup>135</sup> *Ag. Arians*, 2.21.71.

no rivalry and no dissension, as there might be with human beings, Father and Son with the Spirit simply are who they are in perfect community.

### **Cappadocian Fathers**

In the East, the Cappadocian Fathers are the last to play a major role in the development of Trinitarian theology. The influence of Origen is evident in their understanding of the Father as the source of all being, but they are careful to avoid the Arian error of subordinating the Son to the extent of denying his deity. Building on Athanasius, the Cappadocians attempt to go farther in explaining the ὁμοούσιος of the Father and Son. Each of the three fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, will be considered individually at first with concluding statements bringing together their overall teaching and contribution. The focus here will be on summarizing their overall understanding of the relationship of the Father and Son and their view of subordination.

#### **Basil of Caesarea**

Basil's major contribution to Trinitarian theology is his distinction of the words οὐσία and ὑποστάσις, which had been used synonymously, and the defense of the Trinitarian expression "one *ousia*, three hypostasis".<sup>136</sup> The distinction lies in the general and the particular, that which is common to all and that which is unique or individual. Regarding the Trinity, the *ousia* is deity and the hypostases are fatherhood, sonship, and sanctification.<sup>137</sup> The weakness of this distinction is found in that it does not apply precisely to the Godhead as it does to anything else and can lead to erroneous conclusions. For example, three men share what is common to

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<sup>136</sup> Though perhaps not the first to make the distinction, Basil made the most famous defense of it. (*On the Holy Spirit* 5.7, fn. 31)

<sup>137</sup> *Epistles* 214.4 and 236.6.

humanity, thus humanity is their *ousia*, and their individual representation of that *ousia* is their hypostasis. While this generally illustrates the distinction, it also can point to tritheism or the belief in an *ousia* that is the true foundation of being.

In response, Basil argues that when understanding what can be understood about God one should not begin with numbers, because God is not a number. A number is like a word or a letter that signifies something but is not the something it signifies. Numbers provide even less information than words, because they only give a quantity but give no indication of what is being counted. This was a common problem with the heretics, beginning with a word and allowing the human definition of the word to limit the understanding of what it signified instead of beginning with the revelation, particularly of the divine names, to provide the meaning of the word in the divine context. Because they did not begin with the “what” or the “who” of the revelation and they assumed simple addition was the only mathematical equation that could be used, they could only see a contradiction. In addition, they limited “one” to mean an independent monad and could not see that it could also mean unity and in so doing failed to account adequately for the intra-Trinitarian relationships. Because the Son is from the essence of the Father and the Spirit from the essence of the Father through the Son and each is not the other, these three share one essence and each are God. Because the Son and Spirit are not the Father and the Father is not God exclusively, there are not three Gods. All hinges on this relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit that cannot be reduced to mere counting or addition, because the Son and Spirit are never severed from the Father and each indwells the other fully.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 18.45-46. Basil is reluctant to use numbers at all but concedes that their use is inevitable. It would have been interesting had Basil proposed an alternative equation in reference to the *ousia*, such as division, in which one can be divided by one an infinite number of times always remaining one, but he appears to be intent on remaining with the revelation and using numbers only as necessary.

Like his predecessors, Basil believed that the Father is incomprehensible to the human mind and the source of all being. The Son is equally God, generated from and sent by the Father to reveal God to humanity. Any subordination that could indicate that the Son is a lesser being was dismissed. For example, in his work on the Holy Spirit, Basil interprets “right hand” to mean that the Son is honored, not that he is of inferior rank.<sup>139</sup> In his refutation of the Arian Eunomius, Basil rejects the depiction of the Son as the perfect servant created to do the Father’s bidding. He is not rejecting the idea of the Son as an obedient servant, but the idea that an omnipotent God (if the Father alone is God) had to create a servant to do his work.<sup>140</sup> Compare the following passage from *On the Holy Spirit*,

We must not, however, regard the oeconomy through the Son as a compulsory and subordinate ministration resulting from the low estate of a slave, but rather the voluntary solicitude working effectually for His own creation in goodness and in pity, according to the will of God the Father.<sup>141</sup>

Ontological subordination is denied, which would include a being that serves out of necessity or nature and not from the will. Basil is quite clear here in indicating that the Son voluntarily acts according to the will of the Father. This statement is followed by another in which the equality of the power and the operation of the Son and Father are expressed regarding the Son creating all things “not in the discharge of any slavish service, but in the fulfillment of the Father’s will as Creator.”<sup>142</sup> It is an act of the will of the Son to do the Father’s will, but Basil clarifies that the unity and the divinity of the two prevents this from being construed as the Father speaking a command to the Son and the Son obeying.<sup>143</sup> There is a transmission of the will, but it is more

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<sup>139</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 6.15.

<sup>140</sup> Schaff and Wace, *Prolegomena to NPNF*, second series, vol. 8, 5.

<sup>141</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 8.18.

<sup>142</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 8.19.

<sup>143</sup> Basil does use this language: “You are therefore to perceive three, the Lord who gives the order, the Word who creates, and the Spirit who confirms.” *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38.

like “the reflexion of an object in a mirror, passing without note of time from Father to Son.”<sup>144</sup>

The will of the Son is retained, otherwise the Son would be ontologically subordinate, but the unity of the Father and Son and the fact that they transcend time removes any possibility that the Son will not do the Father’s will. This is further indicated in that it is the sole will of the Father to create and it is the will of the Father to create through the Son. He does not need the Son to create but chooses to do so. Similarly, the Son does not need the Spirit to sanctify but wills to do so through the work of the Spirit. Thus, the Three who are God do work together according to their roles with the Father, who wills and is the “original cause”, the Son, who does and is the “create cause”, and the Spirit, who completes and is the “perfecting cause”.<sup>145</sup>

### **Gregory of Nazianzus**

Gregory of Nazianzus holds that the Father is incomprehensible and ineffable, but that does not mean that he cannot be known at least in part.<sup>146</sup> The Father is the first cause or sole principle of all<sup>147</sup> and as Athanasius had taught earlier, is properly only the Father of the Son and that the phrase “God the Father” implies the Son.<sup>148</sup> The two with the Spirit share in one monarchy “an equality of Nature and Union of mind, and an identity of motion, and a convergence of its elements to unity ... so that though numerically distinct there is no severance of Essence.”<sup>149</sup> Although equal, the Son is eternally begotten from the essence of the Father as an act of will. As Athanasius had done, Gregory maintains Origen’s belief in eternal generation

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<sup>144</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 8.20. Basil also teaches that the Holy Spirit has a will that is perfectly aligned with the Father’s will. 16.37

<sup>145</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38.

<sup>146</sup> *Oration* 2.76; *Oration* 28.3.

<sup>147</sup> *Oration* 41.9.

<sup>148</sup> *Oration* 2.38.

<sup>149</sup> *Oration* 29.2.

without relying on his argument that, when applied to creation, led to a belief in the eternality of matter.

The error of Eunomius, an Arian who denied the shared essence and equality of the Father and Son, came from his miscategorizing of what is included in essence, overestimating the ability of human words to express deity, and failing to understand the unique relationship of the Father and Son. Gregory argued that the primary words used to describe God were apophatic, thus without positive content. If God is incorporeal, this indicates what he is not, not who he is. Likewise, unbegotten, unoriginate, unchanging, and incorruptible only describe what God is not. “For what effect is produced upon His Being or Substance by His having no beginning, and being incapable of change or limitation?”<sup>150</sup> Unbegotten and begotten are not indications of different essences and, in fact, the understanding of the unbegotten Father who begets the only begotten Son communicates just the opposite. “For the nature of the relation of Father to Child is this, that the offspring is of the same nature with the parent.”<sup>151</sup> Moreover unbegotten cannot be used as a synonym for God, because “God” is a relative term (i.e., God must be God of something or someone) and unbegotten is not.<sup>152</sup>

Gregory makes a similar argument regarding the Eunomian position that the Father is greater than the Son because the Father is the first cause and therefore of a different and superior nature. Gregory does not deny that the Father is the first cause and that implies that he is in this respect greater than the Son. Rather, being the first cause is not related to the divine nature, but is part of who the Father is. In fact, it is the only major positive distinction of the Father that has been revealed. He argues that the Arian fallacy is confusing a conditioned for an unconditioned, or absolute, term and that because something is greater does not mean that it is greater in every

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<sup>150</sup> *Oration 28.9.*

<sup>151</sup> *Oration 29.10.*

<sup>152</sup> *Oration 29.12.*

respect.<sup>153</sup> There must be some distinctions between the Father and Son, otherwise multiplicity is unnecessary. The task is knowing what belongs to the essence of God and what is particular to each Person. While these are points well taken, Gregory's argument seems to be a bit circular for anyone who does not accept the premise that God is Trinity. Because God is Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit are of the same essence and anything predicated of all applies to all and anything predicated of one applies to one. Therefore first cause is exclusive to the Father and cannot be the essence of God. Although Gregory would argue that this is what Scripture reveals, the Arians could counter by beginning with the premise that God is a monad and reach the opposite conclusion. For the purposes of this paper, the significance is that Gregory is willing to allow some notion of greater and lesser to be allowed in reference to the Godhead but this is to reveal the distinctive roles of the Trinitarian Persons and should not be understood as a subordination of essence or being.

Underlying this argument is a foundational belief that to understand the God revealed, one must not begin with numbers but begin with the relationship of Father and Son. From this relationship, which Jesus Christ revealed, Gregory held that a Son must necessarily be from the same essence as the Father and from there understand the oneness and multiplicity in God. This is a unique relationship analogous of mind to word or living image to living one.<sup>154</sup> Eunomius and other non-Trinitarians rejected or did not begin with this relationship and they could not get past the numbers because they did not accept or understand the relationship between the items they were counting. This crucial distinction is seen when Gregory answers what his opponents believed was an inescapable trap, i.e., whether Father is the name of an essence or an action. The

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<sup>153</sup> *Oration 29.15.*

<sup>154</sup> *Oration 30.20.*



former would mean that the Son must be of a different essence, and the latter would mean that the Son was indeed created because an action must occur in time. Gregory's response is

...Father is not a name either of an essence or of an action ... . But it is the name of the Relation in which the Father stands to the Son, and the Son to the Father. For as with us these names make known a genuine and intimate relation, so, in the case before us too, they denote an identity of nature between Him That is begotten and Him That begets.<sup>155</sup>

He concludes by saying that even if Father is the name of an essence, the relation of Father and Son, Begetter and Begotten, means that ὁμοούσιος would result. The relationship of God the Father and God the Son is primary in providing the context for understanding who God is according to the revelation and is not a secondary consideration or conclusion.

With regards to distinguishing what is attributed to deity and humanity in the Incarnate Son, Gregory sets this principle:

What is lofty you are to apply to the Godhead, and to that Nature in Him which is superior to sufferings and incorporeal; but all that is lowly to the composite condition of Him who for your sakes made Himself of no reputation and was Incarnate ...<sup>156</sup>

The “composite condition” is a term Gregory uses to refer to human nature.<sup>157</sup> While this principle has its merit, it can be somewhat subjective in determining what is lowly and what is lofty. For example, while omnipotence and thirst can be clearly categorized as lofty and lowly, respectively, humility cannot be. Even in Gregory's quote above that alludes to Philippians 2, the Son humbles himself to become incarnate before he took on human nature. In the *Fourth Theological Oration*, the distinction is better made as that with a cause refers to the human nature and that which is absolute or unoriginate to the divine.<sup>158</sup> In his exposition of Proverbs 8:22, he notes that the word translated “created” (ἐκτισέν) in the Septuagint is connected to the

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<sup>155</sup> *Oration* 29.16.

<sup>156</sup> *Oration* 29.17.

<sup>157</sup> *Oration* 29.17, fn. 48.

<sup>158</sup> *Oration* 30.2.

cause of the beginning of God's works, but the word translated "begotten" (γεννᾶ) is not. He concludes that "created" refers to the birth of Jesus and "begotten" to the generation of the Son.

The distinction is applied to the obedience that Jesus learned through his suffering. (Heb. 5:8) Obedience is not a proper term for the Word and is, therefore, not in reference to the divine nature, but the human. Instead, the Word takes the form of a servant on behalf of humanity and "honours obedience by His action".<sup>159</sup> It is difficult to see any other meaning than that obedient action took place, and as Gregory continues, "action is the proof of disposition". It would seem the disposition would be obedience, but Gregory sees this as lowly.

Gregory goes to greater lengths to avoid this term in interpreting Jesus' statement in John 6:38: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." The context clearly indicates that being sent and doing of the Father's will are "from heaven" and thus related to the divine nature, which Gregory acknowledges. But rather than use Basil's argument of an instantaneous aligning of the Son's will with the Father's, Gregory argues that the two only have one will.<sup>160</sup> It seems unlikely that Gregory means that the Son by nature must do the will of the Father, although the ambiguous use of "will" could lead to that conclusion. However, that is the exact opposite point that he wants to make because that would indicate essential subordination of the Son. Gregory will later write that as the advocate for humanity, through the suffering of the Son as man, the Word "persuades" the Father to be patient.<sup>161</sup> This would indicate that here he is using "will" more to mean purpose or plan and arguing that Jesus is saying that he did not have an alternative plan.

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<sup>159</sup> *Oration* 30.6.

<sup>160</sup> *Oration* 30.12.

<sup>161</sup> *Oration* 30.14.

The eschatological subjection of the Son to the Father that the Apostle Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 15:27-28, is also addressed in a similar manner.<sup>162</sup> Gregory begins by writing that the Son and the Father are one God without possibility of being at odds with one another; thus any subjection is in the context of the perfect unity of the Godhead. He also asks that if the Son will be subjected, does that mean the Son is not subjected now? Calling the subjection of the Son “the fulfilling of the Father’s will”, he interprets the phrase to mean the subjection of the church, the body of Christ. As long as there is disobedience among those who the Son came to redeem, this is called disobedient. But when disobedience among the saved is no more, the Son will have completed his submission. This is a strained interpretation ignoring verse 27 where Paul notes that the Father was not included in the all things subjected to the Son and verse 28 where he emphasizes through the use of an intensive pronoun that the Son himself will be subjected to the Father. In making this point, however, Gregory does maintain the equality of the Son and points toward an eternal subjection of the Son, which he defines as “fulfilling the Father’s will”.

Gregory clearly believes in the *ὁμοούσιος* of the Son and the Father and rejects any attempts to argue to the contrary. His principle of distinction between the human and divine natures of the incarnate Word is sound, although his use of it in interpreting Scripture is at times questionable especially when he can be read as coming close to erasing the distinctions between Father and Son in their divine nature interpreting one will rather than the perfect, eternal alignment of two wills. This is not his intent, as seen in his belief in the Father as the first cause and begetter and the Son as the begotten, because Gregory is neither a modalist nor an economic Trinitarian. However, his cautious attempts to avoid subordinationist language that would give fuel to his opponents’ positions created some ambiguity in his own position. Despite the

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<sup>162</sup> *Oration* 30.5.

ambiguity, what does seem clear is that he is concerned about any understanding of obedience or service that the Son must do by nature or force, or “slavishly”, which would constitute ontological subordination.<sup>163</sup>

### Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa holds many of the same positions as Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, but develops and defends the positions to a greater extent. A summary of his Trinitarian views can be seen in his letter to Eustathius, *On the Holy Trinity, and of the Godhead of the Holy Spirit*. Scripture must be the authority in determining what is truth regarding theology, and from Scripture one Godhead is revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>164</sup> Although humanity can comprehend in part the divine nature as it has been revealed, it is ultimately ineffable, which means that attempts to speak about the essence or nature of God are limited to what has been revealed primarily through the operations of God. Any understanding of the essence of God must come from understanding the operations of God. If the operations are different, the natures must be different.

...it is not possible to behold the person of the Father otherwise than by fixing the sight upon it through His image; and the image of the person of the Father is the Only-begotten, and to Him again no man can draw near whose mind has not been illumined by the Holy Spirit, what else is shown from this but that the Holy Spirit is not separated from any operation which is wrought by the Father and the Son? Thus the identity of operation in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit shows plainly the undistinguishable character of their substance.<sup>165</sup>

The Three Persons cooperate although each has distinctive roles. The Father, who is viewed as the unoriginate first cause, reveals himself through the Son with the Spirit allowing humanity to

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<sup>163</sup> *Oration* 30.11, 14.

<sup>164</sup> The specific issue in this letter is to refute the Pneumatomachian position.

<sup>165</sup> *On the Holy Trinity*. Cf. *The Great Catechism* 39.

understand God in such a way as to draw near. For revelation of the incomprehensible Father to be received by humanity, each Person must fulfill his role.

Gregory consistently teaches the cooperation and the distinctive roles of the Father, Son, and Spirit, expressing them as the operations flowing from the Father, proceeding through the Son, and being completed in the Spirit. One should note, however, that this is not part of their nature, but a willing cooperation and thus does not indicate a superior essence of the Father.

Regarding salvation, Gregory writes,

... and now that the Son has accomplished the Father's will ... they ought for this boon to honour the Father and the Son alike, inasmuch as our salvation would not have been wrought, had not the good will of the Father proceeded to actual operation for us through His own power.<sup>166</sup>

In his letter to Ablabius, Gregory makes the same point regarding cooperation and distinctive roles in creation. It is the same operation in which all participate so that it cannot be said of the Godhead that only the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Spirit sanctifies. The roles are distinctive, however, and do not overlap, which is seen in the Spirit's task of distributing good gifts. This does not originate with the Spirit, but through the power, which is the Son, and from the will of the Father. With regards to redemption, all three are redeemer, but only the Son is redeemer in the sense of being the incarnate agent of redemption. Because they transcend time, there is no delay and in that sense no distinction between operations in the Godhead.<sup>167</sup>

Gregory saw, as did Gregory of Nazianzus and Athanasius, that one of the fundamental flaws in Eunomius's understanding of God was the failure to see the significance of the title "Father" and the relationship implied therein. It is this relationship as revealed in Scripture that should inform concerning what can be known about God rather than making it secondary. The baptismal formula contains the one name of God distinguished as Father, Son, and Spirit.

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<sup>166</sup> *Ag. Eunomius* 12.3.

<sup>167</sup> *Concerning Why not Three Gods*.

Eunomius sought to replace “Father” with “Supreme Being” but that would have a twofold negative effect of making Son and Spirit lesser beings and shifting focus from what is implied in the title “Father”.<sup>168</sup> Father does not refer to essence or sovereign authority but to relationship.<sup>169</sup> Understanding this relationship provides the context for understanding what can be known about the divine. Using the familiar metaphor of a light source and brightness, Gregory of Nyssa states that Scripture teaches that the Son is from the Father and the Father is never without the Son.<sup>170</sup> In fact, the Son “is always implied silently in the name of the Father.”<sup>171</sup> Superiority of essence is not indicated in the name, but quite the contrary. The relationship of Father and Son reveals the ὁμοούσιος. This is not an arbitrary categorizing of words as titles or essences, but based on the formula found in Scripture that shows Father, Son, and Spirit distinguish the one God.<sup>172</sup> The Father is ingenerate and the source or cause of the Son, and the Son is the express image of the Father, which, if this relationship is understood properly, means “that however great the Person of the Father is, so great also is the express image of the Person; for it is not possible that the express image should be less than the Person contemplated in it.”<sup>173</sup> As Gregory wrote to Ablabius, knowing that something exists and how it came to exist still leaves open the question of what the nature of the thing is. The divine nature cannot be known, but what can be known through the revealed relationship of Father and Son is that both possess the divine nature.

From Gregory’s discussion, one might conclude that the Father is greater because he is the cause of the Son and Spirit and it is his will that is carried out. Gregory would agree provided that cause and will are not connected to essence. As stated earlier, how something came to exist

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<sup>168</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 1.13-15.

<sup>169</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 2.15.

<sup>170</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 1.26. He also uses the argument that God could never have been without his wisdom, power, or truth. Ag. *Eunomius* 1.38.

<sup>171</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 1.39.

<sup>172</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 2.2.

<sup>173</sup> *Concerning Why not Three Gods*.

does not necessarily indicate its nature. Likewise, having a will might be part of a nature, but the expressing of that will is not. Gregory writes of one divine will, but this will is the “community of will”, which when combined to the community of nature points to the oneness of the Father and Son.<sup>174</sup> When he writes of obedience of the Son, he limits this to the incarnation and qualifies this as saying the obedience even here does not mean the loss of the Son’s free will.<sup>175</sup> This qualification seems to indicate Gregory’s bias against using the word “obedience” in connection with the divinity of the Son. If obedience had a common connotation of being coerced or resulting from being born into a situation, such as slavery, that required obedience, this term could not be properly used with reference to the Son.<sup>176</sup> Eunomius desired to have the word interpreted that way, because Scripture does indicate that the Son obeys and comes under authority.<sup>177</sup> However, in the incarnation, the eternal Son willingly becomes obedient and takes the form of a servant. Obedience and even incarnation cannot be part of the essence of God the Son; otherwise he would be of a different essence from the Father. They can be an expression of the will. But in obediently taking the form of a servant, the Son does not become a servant by nature but absorbs “slavish subordination” and transforms “the human and lowly to become both Lord and Christ.”<sup>178</sup> “Slavish subordination” here appears to be a dysphemism for human nature, which in Gregory’s Christology becomes transformed or renewed, and in fact divine, by the

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<sup>174</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 1.34. See also 2.15 where he uses the phrase “community of will”, calls it the will of the Three Persons, and speaks individually of the Spirit’s will. See the first chapter of *The Great Catechism* in which the Logos is described as having a will.

<sup>175</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 2.11. Gregory of Nazianzus communicated a similar idea in stating that the Son did not slavishly do the will of the Father.

<sup>176</sup> In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory considers obedience a positive result of fear controlled by reason. It is likely that he would not want this term applied to the Son, who could do nothing from controlled or uncontrolled fear.

<sup>177</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 12.3.

<sup>178</sup> Ag. *Eunomius* 12.3.

divine nature.<sup>179</sup> He likens the human nature to one drop of vinegar in the sea, and, in his understanding of the kenosis, the divine to a fire present in a piece of wood but not flaming.

The unity of the divine and human nature in Christ ties into Gregory's soteriology. Although soteriology is not as central to Gregory's arguments as it is to those of Athanasius, it is nevertheless important. In *The Great Catechism*, he explains God's plan of salvation. It is important to remember that because of his Neo-Platonic leanings, he considers nature to be reality and not just a category of thought describing reality. Although created good, human nature was corrupted by the sin of Adam and Eve and thus all who share in that nature were also corrupted. The problem is not simply at the particular level, which are just manifestations of the real problem. Individuals might be able to modify their behavior, but they cannot change the nature that they all share which is opposed to God. Because the problem is at the level of nature, it must be dealt with at that level and the only nature that could do that is the divine nature. No creature, no matter how highly exalted, could bear the divine nature fully. Only one who is fully God could. The scriptural witness of the Son who experiences all that it means to be human yet without sin might look like weakness or inferiority to those who do not realize what is truly required for salvation and what took place in the incarnation. Because only God could do what was required, this is not a demonstration of weakness or inferiority on the part of the Son, but one of the greatest demonstrations of omnipotence in that the divine could unite with the human and not be diminished.<sup>180</sup>

Through the uniting of the human and divine natures, salvation occurs first and foremost at the level of nature and it is complete, the divinization of the human, because man was

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<sup>179</sup> *Ag. Eunomius* 5.4. See also 5.3.

<sup>180</sup> *The Great Catechism* 24.



completely defiled and the Son's assumption of human nature was complete.<sup>181</sup> By bringing even death into contact with the divine, the resurrection of Christ by the power of God demonstrates the end of death's hold on human nature and the resurrection then becomes the principle for new life.<sup>182</sup> While Gregory's soteriology creates the grounds for universalism,<sup>183</sup> Gregory does place great emphasis on human free will. Like Origen, he believes human free will must be operative for salvation on God's terms, through faith, to occur.<sup>184</sup> Theodicean concerns are apparent, but the immediate anthropological concern, which ultimately is the soteriological concern, is that free will is essential to being made in the image of God<sup>185</sup> and without it "virtue necessarily disappears".<sup>186</sup> This leads to fatalism and accompanying notions of antinomianism. Although the nature has been changed through the work of Christ, individual human beings must exercise their will as faith for the change to be particularized.

The centrality of the human will in soteriology parallels the significance of the will in Christology. If God desires humanity to choose to believe, God creating must be an act of the will as must be God redeeming. The Son as the agent of creation and redemption fulfills his role voluntarily and not because he must because of his nature or the dictates of the Father. Although Gregory writes against the obedience of the Son, he has in mind a forced obedience or an obedience by nature. What he affirms, but avoiding the word "obedience", is a voluntary aligning of the Son's will with the Father's will, which is a voluntary obedience.

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<sup>181</sup> *The Great Catechism* 35.

<sup>182</sup> *The Great Catechism* 32. This is in part Gregory's understanding of the ransom aspect of the atonement in which the incarnate Son attracts Satan like bait on a hook. Gregory leaves the impression that even Satan will benefit from the encounter. See especially chapters 23-26.

<sup>183</sup> Gregory has been interpreted this way although he differs from Origen. Origen taught that through successive lives all will eventually be saved through the exercising of the will. Gregory indicates in chapter 35 of the *Great Catechism* that those who do not repent must be cleansed in a manner appropriate with their cases.

<sup>184</sup> *The Great Catechism* 30.

<sup>185</sup> *The Great Catechism* 5.

<sup>186</sup> *The Great Catechism* 31.

## Subordination of the Son in Cappadocian Theology

One of the major contributions of the Cappadocian Fathers to the development of Trinitarian theology is the emphasis on what can be known about God through the revealed relationships and operations of the Godhead. The titles Father and Son, prominently used throughout Scripture, point to a particular kind of relationship, analogous but not identical to the human counterpart. The Son is from the Father's essence and because eternity is part of this essence the Son must be eternally from the Father. Likewise, Scripture records Father, Son, and Spirit, fulfilling different roles in the operations of creation and redemption, but in a united way with all coming from the Father, through the Son, and perfected by the Spirit.<sup>187</sup> Maurice Wiles notes that even here the Cappadocians cannot allow this to be "an invariable description of the activity of God", because such a difference of person still could be (and was being) understood as a difference of essence.<sup>188</sup> Wiles adds that the Cappadocians concluded that the only difference in the three Persons is found in their internal relationship to each other, but in their relationship to the world there is no difference. Compounding this problem, the Cappadocians do not give distinctive meaning of the internal relations "generation" and "procession". This sounds very similar to the conclusion of Augustine except that the Cappadocians utilize *περιχώρησις* to explain how this can be. *Περιχώρησις* maintains the unity of God without losing the threeness, and it keeps a connection between the operations of God and the immanent relationship. Nevertheless, as Wiles points out, if there is no distinction in the activity of the Trinity, the understanding of the Trinity cannot come through human reflection on the person

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<sup>187</sup> Here the mutual indwelling, or the *περιχώρησις*, plays a prominent role in their understanding. Basil, or possibly Gregory of Nyssa, *Epistle* 38.4.

<sup>188</sup> Maurice Wiles, "Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity", in *Doctrines of God and Christ in the Early Church*, 25.

and work of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit and must be based on an authoritative revelation (i.e., the New Testament).<sup>189</sup>

Of concern to this current study is the minimizing of distinctions in the doctrine of the Trinity. In defending the doctrine against the heresies that they faced, did the Cappadocians go too far in removing distinctions in the operations of God toward the world and to leave the internal distinction as relatively meaningless? If so, is the doctrine of the Trinity only logically and soteriologically necessary because the Bible declares it and Christian theologians have interpreted human experience in such a way as to support what they read in the Bible or have been told that it says? As stated earlier, the question for the patristics was ‘What kind of God would produce this kind of salvation?’ Without meaningful distinctions, the doctrine of the Trinity appears to be an unnecessary extravagance or novelty. The ante-Nicene fathers seemed to understand this, as did Athanasius and in many ways the Cappadocians, but as the doctrine developed and the attacks of their opponents were more precise, everything other than the internal relations was removed as distinctions.

Even with the internal relations, the Cappadocians are consistent with the early church’s understanding of the Father as the first cause of all being and for the most part operations. While they would deny any essential subordinationism, they cannot avoid any sense of subordination. This is the view of Kelly, who in discussing Gregory of Nyssa’s understanding of the procession of the Spirit, writes “It is clearly Gregory’s doctrine that the Son acts as an agent, no doubt in subordination to the Father Who is the fountainhead of the Trinity in the production of the Spirit.”<sup>190</sup> He later writes that the Cappadocians understood the Father as the fountainhead

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<sup>189</sup> Wiles, 104. Wiles is arguing that the Cappadocians (and other theologians) were building on some pre-existing, clearly articulated belief in the doctrine of a triune God. He is refuting Leonard Hodgson’s statement that human reason reflecting on the work of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit produced the doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>190</sup> Kelly, 263.

without any sense of subordinationism.<sup>191</sup> Prestige sees the Cappadocians, who are building on Athanasius' thought, as using subordination in the Godhead as the grounds for divine unity. By seeing the distinctions and unity in the intra-Trinitarian relations, the Cappadocians are able to make "being generated" as much a characteristic of God as being ingenerate or uncreated. The language of first cause implies some type of subordination, but by beginning with the ὁμοούσιος relationship of Father and Son all essential subordinationism is excluded.<sup>192</sup>

### **Hilary of Poitiers**

In the fourth century, the church in the West had been spared much of the controversy in the East, in general holding to Tertullian's formula of one God in three persons. Hilary of Poitiers, however, was the notable exception. He was a student of Origen, and his theology reflects that Eastern influence especially in his understanding of the Trinity. There is an insistence on the equality of the Father, Son, and Spirit, a point he repeatedly emphasizes, and the distinction of nature and will. Hilary also sees the Father as the source and the subsequent subordinating implications for the Son and Spirit.

Hilary begins his work *On the Trinity* by emphasizing the connection between knowledge of God and eternal life. God asserted his absolute, eternal existence in the divine name YHWH, but little else could be known about God because of the finitude of the human mind. Creation and the word of God spoken through various prophets allowed glimpses into who God is, and these glimpses gave hope of eternal life because it would be irrational and "unworthy of God to usher man into an existence which has some share of His thought and wisdom, only to await the

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<sup>191</sup> Kelly, 265.

<sup>192</sup> Prestige, 249, 254-255.

sentence of life withdrawn and of eternal death . . . .”<sup>193</sup> While this partial knowledge of God could inspire loyalty, it could not overcome the sense of inevitable destruction of body and soul. Hilary is speaking of God the Father<sup>194</sup> and pointing out that God understood as Father alone because of his transcendence and humanity’s limitations is insufficient in providing the knowledge of God sufficient for eternal life.

The hope is found in the full revelation of God as recorded in John 1. The Word who is God became flesh and bridged the gap sufficiently to provide the knowledge of God that overcame the dread of certain death with hope. On God’s initiative, the bridging occurred in the union of the divine and human and salvation was made possible for all who would choose to receive this divine gift. Although human understanding of God still played a role, it was removed as a prerequisite for knowing God. Revelation transforms reason; faith then understanding. Faith preserves the believer until understanding catches up.<sup>195</sup> Believers can know God in such a way that they are not ignorant of Him, yet cannot describe Him.<sup>196</sup>

It is more than the incarnation that Hilary has in mind with regards to what was efficacious in the life of Christ for salvation. Christ’s activities throughout his life give the believer confidence that he was indeed both God and man in the full sense of both words. Christ’s death is a voluntary submission to the penalty of death assigned to humanity for sin. In dying on the cross Christ removed the world’s condemnation, and in rising again overcomes death to provide immortality to mortals. Hilary acknowledges the paradoxes evident when considering that the immortal Son died, but again he emphasizes the importance of the revelation rather than trying to understand how it was accomplished.

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<sup>193</sup> *On the Trinity*, 1.9.

<sup>194</sup> See *On the Trinity*, 1.3.

<sup>195</sup> *On the Trinity*, 1.12.

<sup>196</sup> *On the Trinity*, 2.7.

This soteriological emphasis at the beginning of his Trinitarian theology lays out the intrinsic connection between the revelation of God as Trinity and salvation. From Hilary's perspective, there is no salvation apart from a God who is Trinity. A transcendent God conceived of as only Father could not save, because humanity could not know him sufficiently to receive eternal life. If he was able to be known sufficiently by the finite mind of a human, he would not be infinite. The Word reveals the Father fully in the incarnation in such a way that God remains God and becomes man, transcendent and immanent, supreme and humble. Like Athanasius, Hilary understands that Christ must be God and God must be Trinity to accomplish redemption for humanity. Limiting the meaning of one will limit the meaning of the other. A cross that is only an example of love does not require a savior who is God, and a God who cannot come to save the ones he loves is not worthy to be called God.<sup>197</sup> To understand the tragedy of sin, the desperation of the human situation, and the power of the cross one must understand the greatness of God and vice versa. Saving faith is "the belief not merely in God, but in God as a Father, not merely in Christ, but in Christ as the Son of God, in Him, not as a creature, but as God the Creator, born of God."<sup>198</sup>

Hilary sees this link between soteriology and Trinitarian theology in his defense of the interpretation of "one" in John 10:30 as Jesus proclaiming his unity with the Father rather than merely an agreement of will. He references John 17 in which Jesus prays that his followers would be one as he and the Father are one. The oneness of Father and Son links the two passages and if it is limited to will in one passage it should be interpreted the same way in the other. If John 10:30 is translated as an agreement of will, the end of salvation that Jesus prays for in John 17 would be that his followers would have an agreement of will. But the John 17 passage

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<sup>197</sup> Hilary makes a similar point with his interpretation of John 3:16. What does it say about God if the evidence of his love for his creatures is another creature rather than his only begotten Son? *On the Trinity* 6.40.

<sup>198</sup> *On the Trinity* 1.17.

relates that the unity is much more than agreement describing the mutual indwelling of the Father and Son. This is unique to the Godhead but provides a pattern of unity for redeemed humanity that comes from the glory that the Father gives the Son and is a witness to the world that the Son is from the Father. Although Hilary confesses that he does not understand how glory unites, the resulting unity is much more than simply followers of Christ agreeing with one another but is the indwelling of Christ in human nature. “For so are we all one, because the Father is in Christ and Christ in us.”<sup>199</sup> Therefore, if there is no mutual indwelling of Father and Christ, there is no unity with the Father other than agreement. But this glory refers to the eternal relationship of Father and Son that had been temporarily affected by the incarnation but restored after the death of Christ.<sup>200</sup> Once this glory is restored, the unity of God will include the incarnate Son and thus human nature will be forever united with the divine and in so doing deify humanity. Salvation on this scale could only be accomplished by God and through God.<sup>201</sup>

Hilary, like the fathers before him, knew the significant revelation found in the divine names, Father, Son, and Spirit. In particular, Father and Son point to the begetter and the begotten and the ὁμοούσιος of the two.<sup>202</sup> This is seen not only in the divine names, but also in the clear teaching of Scripture.<sup>203</sup> As he describes the distinctions, especially with regards to the incarnation, he maintains the equality of the Godhead even though the Father sends and the Son is sent and the Son came to earth to do the will of the Father (John 6:38).<sup>204</sup> Being sent is proof of the Son’s obedience and the Father’s authority.<sup>205</sup> Regarding creation, Hilary writes “the Father, by His commands, is the Cause; the Son, by His execution of the things commanded, sets

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<sup>199</sup> *On the Trinity* 8.13. He begins laying out this argument in 8.10-12.

<sup>200</sup> *On the Trinity* 9.39.

<sup>201</sup> *On the Trinity* 8.38.

<sup>202</sup> *On the Trinity* 2.20, 4.9. Cf. 6.26; 7.11.

<sup>203</sup> Jn. 10:30, 16:28, 1:18, 10:38, 14:11. *On the Trinity* 2.23.

<sup>204</sup> *On the Trinity* 3.9, 14.

<sup>205</sup> *On the Trinity* 6.27.

in order.”<sup>206</sup> Whether commander or agent, neither is a greater being but each has and performs his distinctive role.

When the Law says, *And God said, Let there be a firmament*, and then adds, *And God made the firmament*, it introduces no other distinction than that of Person. It indicates no difference of power or nature, and makes no change of name. Under the one title of *God* it reveals, first, the thought of Him who spoke, and then the action of Him Who created.<sup>207</sup>

There is no hint that doing the will of another or obeying the command of another indicates inferiority. In fact, the ability for the Son to do whatever the Father commands is a sign of omnipotence.

Absolute power is this, that its possessor can execute as Agent whatever His words as Speaker can express. When unlimited power of expression is combined with unlimited power of execution, then this creative power, commensurate with the commanding word, possesses the true nature of God.<sup>208</sup>

Rather than avoid any suggestion of subordinationism that might be derived from another understanding of the Son as agent of the Father, Hilary includes not only the Son’s aligning of his will with the Father’s, but also the Son’s ability to do what the Father commands and the nature of what is commanded. The Father is directing the Son to do things that only God can do and in doing these things, the Son is demonstrating that he is God.<sup>209</sup> There is a clear distinction between the essence and the roles. While essential subordination does necessarily mean subordination in all other ways, a subordinate role does not necessarily mean essential subordination. In fact equality of Father and Son demonstrates that the Son has freedom of will that he uses to do the will of the Father.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> *On the Trinity* 4.21.

<sup>207</sup> *On the Trinity* 5.5.

<sup>208</sup> *On the Trinity* 5.5.

<sup>209</sup> *On the Trinity* 5.13. Cf. 7.12; 7.17.

<sup>210</sup> *On the Trinity* 9. 50.



With this distinction providing the context, Hilary understands the incarnation to be a true demonstration of omnipotence. According to the Father's will, the Son could willingly take on the significantly lesser nature of humanity and do so without being diminished in his divine nature.<sup>211</sup> Hilary also sees scripture as revealing that the Son manifests God as obedient and this obedience is connected to the Son's Personhood.<sup>212</sup> Within the name "Son" is not just the ὁμοούσιος, but also the subordinate role of the Son who "can do nothing of Himself" and who does "whatever the Father does" and though distinct is equal to and one with the Father.<sup>213</sup> This does not mean the Son is by nature a servant, which Hilary uses to mean human nature. A servant is one who is subjected by nature or compulsion, not as an expression of a free will, and has a corruptible nature.<sup>214</sup> The Son only secondarily becomes a servant in the incarnation.<sup>215</sup> He clarifies this distinction later in interpreting the subjection passage of 1 Corinthians 15.

Although he humbled Himself, His nature knew no humiliation: though He was obedient, it was a voluntary obedience for He became obedient by humbling Himself. The Only-begotten God humbled Himself, and obeyed His Father even to the death of the Cross: but as what, as man or as God, is He to be subjected to the Father, when all things have been subjected to Him?<sup>216</sup>

Christ is subject to the Father as man, not as God, but the voluntary obedience was made by the Son as God. The distinction is again made between willing obedience and necessary obedience, whether by nature or force.

Salvation depends upon the deity of the Son and His unity with the Father. The Son reveals the Father but is not the Father, who alone is the source of all being. The divine names

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<sup>211</sup> *On the Trinity* 5.18.

<sup>212</sup> *On the Trinity* 5.24. Hilary does state that the "obedience of death" has nothing to do with the form of God. (*On the Trinity* 9.14)

<sup>213</sup> *On the Trinity* 7.21.

<sup>214</sup> *On the Trinity* 12.5.

<sup>215</sup> *On the Trinity* 11.13-14.

<sup>216</sup> *On the Trinity* 11.30.

indicate simultaneously that the Son<sup>217</sup> is equal to and one with the Father and that the Son has a subordinate role. However, for Hilary, subordinate role does not have negative connotations provided that it is a willing subordination. Rather, sending or being sent or commanding or obeying is of equal importance, because one completes the other.

### **Augustine**

In *On the Trinity*, Augustine lays out his understanding of the Trinity in a way that sums the development of the doctrine, especially in the West, and delves deeper into the doctrine through his development of the vestiges. His limited knowledge of the Greek language left him with only Hilary's work as his primary bridge to the East, and this is reflected in his approach to the doctrine and his emphases. He does not begin with the atonement as did Athanasius and Hilary but begins with an explanation and defense of the unity of God and then proceeding to the atonement. The resulting theology has been interpreted as both a great defense of orthodoxy and a significant departure from especially Nicene orthodoxy. In an introduction to an English translation of Augustine's works, Shedd argues that the accusations of those who say Augustine departed from orthodoxy, in particular the erasing of all subordinationism, are "too sweeping and unqualified".<sup>218</sup> As will be shown below, Shedd is correct in his argument, but that is not to say that Augustine's emphases on the unity of the Godhead and the indivisible nature of their work do not leave the impression that although he uses the language of subordination, he is not comfortable with it. By emphasizing the unity over the distinctions, Augustine can reduce the distinctions to the point that they do not seem meaningful, but simply an idiosyncrasy of God. In addition, the constant reference to the accommodations that the infinite God has made in

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<sup>217</sup> Hilary also saw this in "Word" and "Image".

<sup>218</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, "An Introductory Essay", NPNF, first series, vol. 3, 4.

communicating with finite humanity indicates that things are never quite what they appear to be with God.<sup>219</sup>

*On the Trinity* begins by emphasizing that this subject must be approached from the perspective of faith and Scripture dealing first with the revelation and then with reason. As stated above, he does not begin his Trinitarian understanding with soteriology, but he does seek to build it on the revelation of Scripture and where the Scripture is the cross cannot be far removed. “First, however, we must demonstrate, according to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, whether the faith be so.”<sup>220</sup> He understands the limitations of the human mind to understand the infinite God and thus the limitations of human words in Scripture.

In outlining the orthodox view of the Trinity, Augustine writes of the unity of the Three Persons as one God, their equality, and their distinctions. While the Three work indivisibly, nevertheless each has specific tasks or activities, i.e., the Son alone becomes incarnate, the Spirit alone descended upon the Son and the church, and the Father alone is the Father of the Son.<sup>221</sup> John 1 is a clear declaration of the Son as being from the same substance as the Father and distinct from creation which is not. This is the revelation in Scripture and should be sufficient, but questions and attacks from heretics and pagans necessitate further response.

Augustine states that the canonical rule for interpreting Scripture related to the relationship of the Father and Son is that the Son is equal to the Father “according to the form of God” and less “according to the form of a servant”.<sup>222</sup> For example, Augustine attributes to the human nature Jesus’ statements regarding the Father being greater and “... it is not mine to

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<sup>219</sup> Like allegorical interpretation, identifying accommodations is a highly subjective undertaking. God is beyond our understanding and accommodation must have occurred to some extent. But if God is beyond us, how can we really know when he is being plain and when he is accommodating?

<sup>220</sup> *On the Trinity* 1.2.4. Augustine does believe that the Father and Spirit can take corporeal forms, but it is not in the same sense that the Word became flesh uniting the divine and human natures. *On the Trinity* 2.17.35.

<sup>221</sup> *On the Trinity* 1.4.7.

<sup>222</sup> *On the Trinity* 2.1.2.

give”.<sup>223</sup> The first passage, in fact, is further interpreted to refer to the equality of the Son to the Father that cannot be seen during the incarnation.<sup>224</sup> This rule seems to imply that there is no subordination of any type with regards to divinity. But acknowledging that it can be ambiguous as to which category Scripture belongs, he offers a third category, Scripture that refers to the Son as being from the Father. To this category, he assigns, for example, “The Son can do nothing of Himself but what He seeth the Father do.”<sup>225</sup> This cannot mean the Son in human nature, because it would mean that the Father also must have been incarnated to be so emulated. Thus it must refer to the Father as the source of all the Son is and that the two work indivisibly.<sup>226</sup>

These three categories represent three key elements in understanding the relationship of the Father and Son, namely, equality of essence, subordination of relationship, and theanthropic subordination.<sup>227</sup> The divine names indicate simultaneously equality of essence and subordination of relationship, and the incarnation, especially as described in Philippians 2, demonstrates theanthropic subordination. The Son was made less by becoming human and yet did not cease to be divine, and this becoming less was done so that humanity could better perceive God.<sup>228</sup>

While Augustine is following the orthodox position with its implicit subordination, he can at times appear to blur the distinctions between the Persons almost to the point of identity and that the distinctions that are made are primarily accommodations to the human inability to truly comprehend God.

But in order to intimate the Trinity, some things are separately affirmed, the Persons being also each severally named; and yet are not to be understood as though the other

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<sup>223</sup> Jn. 14:28, 14:26.

<sup>224</sup> *On the Trinity* 1.9.18.

<sup>225</sup> Jn. 5:19.

<sup>226</sup> *On the Trinity* 2.1.3.

<sup>227</sup> Shedd, 4.

<sup>228</sup> *On the Trinity* 4.15.25-26.

Persons were excluded, on account of the unity of the same Trinity and the One substance and Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>229</sup>

This can be understood as his expression of the cooperation of the Persons that had been taught in the East, but without the accompanying delineation of roles or tasks, it can leave the impression that there are no real distinctions or if there are they are not meaningful. Augustine sees that Scripture teaches distinctions, but by not beginning from soteriology, the distinctions seem to be of less significance. The threeness of the Trinity itself is an accommodation to the limited understanding of human beings, because three are one in eternity but in words are separate. The work of Father, Son, and Spirit is indivisible, but creatures cannot manifest this unity.<sup>230</sup>

When he writes about the sending of the Son, his position is that the Son sends himself because he is the word by which the Father commanded that he be sent.<sup>231</sup> In the East, this sending and being sent had been seen as part of the distinctions between Father and Son and it seems that Augustine is removing this distinction. He goes on to point out that there is a distinction between the sender and the sent, but this again is an accommodation to human perception and not really what is happening within the Trinity. His main point is that the one sent is not necessarily of a lesser nature than the one who sends. As he will later write, “sender” and “sent” do not argue against the eternity and consubstantiality of the Son and Father but to their roles.<sup>232</sup> The distinction between Father and Son remains, and his earlier statement was his way of describing the Son’s voluntary participation in being sent, which was a concern of the Cappadocians and others who sought to preserve the understanding of the Son’s will.

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<sup>229</sup> *On the Trinity* 1.9.19.

<sup>230</sup> *On the Trinity* 4.21.31.

<sup>231</sup> *On the Trinity* 2.5.8-9.

<sup>232</sup> *On the Trinity* 4.20.27.

The Father and the Spirit could also come to earth and take human form, although not in the same sense as the Son did in the incarnation. In the East, the Father had been understood to be transcendent and beyond human understanding and the incarnation of the Word was required for humanity to have a full revelation of God sufficient for salvation. While Augustine's view does not exclude this understanding, it seems to reduce the importance of the unique role of the Son in salvation and even of a Trinitarian view of God. Athanasius's and Hilary's soteriological arguments (as well as others before them) demonstrated that only God who is Trinity could accomplish salvation that resulted in the deification of redeemed humanity. Augustine leaves open the possibility that another understanding of God could have accomplished the same.

From the first century forward, the word "God" in Scripture had been interpreted by the church as primarily applying to the Father. Augustine differs here by attributing the word primarily to the Trinity and only when context demands to the Father.<sup>233</sup> The Trinity speaks with Adam in the Garden and Abraham at Mamre. In John 14:1, "'Ye believe in God, believe also in me:' that is in the same way you believe in God so also believe in me, because I and the Father are one God."<sup>234</sup> Even in John 1:1, he forces the Trinity in here where he renders "the Word was with God" as the Word, who is the Son, being with the Father, Son, and Spirit, which hardly seems to be John's intended meaning.<sup>235</sup> The Augustinian emphasis is squarely on the oneness of God, but it is nevertheless one God who is Trinity. This is seen further in his interpretive rule which differentiates between Scripture that refers to essence and that which is relative with the former referring to the Trinity and the latter to a particular Person of the Trinity.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> *On the Trinity* 2.10.18.

<sup>234</sup> *On the Trinity* 1.12.27. He also does this with 1 Tim. 6:14-15. (*On the Trinity* 1.6.10-11)

<sup>235</sup> *On the Trinity* 6.2.3.

<sup>236</sup> *On the Trinity* 5.8.9.

Although he did not know Greek, Augustine sees the significance of the distinction between essence and relation that the Cappadocian Fathers used in refuting the Arians who confused the two. Father and Son are relational terms and refer to a specific kind of relationship that reveals the nature of the relationship of their essence. The Father is the source of all being, and thus the beginning of the Son.<sup>237</sup> Since nothing in God is accidental this is an eternal relationship, and because they are Father and Son they are of the same essence. Augustine illustrates the difference between essence and relationship with the example that a man who is a master has both an essence (humanity) and a relationship (master).<sup>238</sup> Similarly, God is Father, Son, and Spirit. Begetter and the Begotten are equal terms to Father and Son. Unbegotten is not a relational term, but it is a negative term that does not say what God is, only what he is not.<sup>239</sup> The conclusion is that the Trinity is the one God, but the Trinity is not the Father or the Son or the Spirit and each of these three is God.

With this distinction as the context, what can seem as contradictory in Augustine's theology can be clarified. The Father, Son, and Spirit individually are as great as they are together,<sup>240</sup> yet each cannot exist without the other.<sup>241</sup> Greatness refers to the essence, which is one and therefore there is only one God, and the interdependence refers to the eternal relationships of the three to each other. How one is described with respect to essence refers to them all, but their roles are particular although they are undertaken in a perichoretic manner. In this sense also, the Son must be equal in all things to the Father to be equal in anything<sup>242</sup> and at the same time is not unbegotten or the begetter. The bond in the relationship of Father to Son

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<sup>237</sup> *On the Trinity* 4.20.29.

<sup>238</sup> *On the Trinity* 7.1.2.

<sup>239</sup> *On the Trinity* 5.6.7.

<sup>240</sup> *On the Trinity* 6.8.9.

<sup>241</sup> *On the Trinity* 6.2.3. Cf. 6.10.12.

<sup>242</sup> *On the Trinity* 6.3.5.

also has personhood. Otherwise it could be conceivable that something external to God is integral to the Godhead. The Holy Spirit is the absolute love binding Father and Son and poured out on humanity.<sup>243</sup>

The proper human response to God is love, and this is the connection for Augustine between the Trinity and soteriology. One cannot love what one does not know, and the end of salvation is that redeemed humanity might be able to love God. Humanity is limited in its ability to know God sufficiently partly because of the incomprehensibility of God and partly because of the sin problem that makes all people enemies of God and that results in God turning people over to their sin. In the incarnation, God reveals himself through the Son and frees humanity from bondage to sin and the devil by allowing himself to be killed as an innocent, righteous man paying the debt that the human race owed. The devil unwittingly accepts the payment, apparently not anticipating the consequences of his acceptance. The payment is made, humanity is freed, and the devil conquered, but this justification is only one part of what needed to be done. As Romans 5 indicates, people are not just sinners, but also enemies of God and objects of his wrath and thus need to be reconciled in this relationship. This requires the healing of human pride, which the incarnation accomplishes by example “through such great humility of God” demonstrated in the obedience of God the Son to God the Father.<sup>244</sup> While the obedience might be attributed to the incarnate Son and theanthropic subordination, it is still an obedience by God the Son and not merely the human nature of the Son. The humility is an act of the divine nature of the Son, who willingly becomes human.

Humility and willing obedience of the Son play an integral role in Augustine’s soteriology in two ways. First, the omnipotent God could have eliminated his creature, the devil,

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<sup>243</sup> *On the Trinity* 7.2.6.

<sup>244</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.16.21, 13.17.22.



through the use of power but chose instead to use righteousness because he wants righteousness from us. The use of power in lieu of righteousness is the way of the devil and fallen man and to bring humanity back into a right relationship that resulted in right behavior required a remedy that used righteousness first.<sup>245</sup> The Son must be human so that he can suffer and die. His divinity shows that suffering and dying was an act of his will, and when we realize what he could have done and understand what he chose in humility to do, the power of righteousness can be seen. Power does come in the resurrection where death is conquered in the resurrection of the Son and the eternal uniting of his humanity and divinity,<sup>246</sup> but righteousness comes first. Secondly, God humbling himself to take on human nature gives us hope and greater certainty that God is for us. Although he could have used another way or sent a creature, God came himself expressing his great love for us thereby giving us assurance of immortality, for how could a God who would go to such lengths to redeem then extinguish those whom he redeemed.<sup>247</sup>

Our connection to the work of Christ is faith in what he did for us. From this faith love results. Faith in Jesus Christ rests the promises of immortality on divine authority because since God could become man, it opens the possibility that man could become sons of God.<sup>248</sup> It is this assurance of immortality that frees us to live according to a free will that does not fail to achieve what it desires and never desires anything that is not righteous. This can only occur through faith in Jesus Christ, because outside a right relationship with God there is no complete control over life.<sup>249</sup> The love that results from faith is not a feeling or action that we manufacture but is given

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<sup>245</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.13.17.

<sup>246</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.14.18.

<sup>247</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.10.13

<sup>248</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.9.12.

<sup>249</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.7.10.

to us by the Holy Spirit.<sup>250</sup> It is this love that allows us to exercise our will freely without wickedness. In the Godhead, love and will are identical and through faith and the work of the Holy Spirit, the believer's will is transformed into love.<sup>251</sup> This love allows believers to have the oneness with each other and God for which Jesus prayed (John 17), which is the true end of salvation.<sup>252</sup>

In his views on the atonement, Augustine holds to the the distinctions of the Trinitarian Persons and the subordination of the incarnate Son to the Father, Spirit, and Son. Although these distinctions are important to how God accomplishes salvation, they seem temporary or illusory and not integral to their intra-Trinitarian relations. Outside the incarnation, the only real distinction between Father and Son is the Father as the begetter and the Son as the begotten, but beyond being a description of this unique relationship in the Godhead, it does not appear to have much relevance. Other than the belief this God is the one revealed to have created and redeemed, there is no indication that only a God who is Trinity could have done so. This is likely the result of his not beginning his argument from soteriology.

Even without this crucial connection between salvation and the Trinity, Augustine does find relational and theanthropic subordination to be key to the atonement. The Father eternally begets the Son and sends him to earth. The Son humbles himself to take on human flesh and lives as less than the Father although always equal in essence and in subordination to the Father. By humbling himself, the Son restores righteousness for humanity by using righteousness and not power to make the payment for sin and ransom humanity. His perfect obedience and humility are both an example for humanity and the evidence of his righteousness. Although Augustine

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<sup>250</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.10.14.

<sup>251</sup> *On the Trinity* 13.7.10; 13.9.12.

<sup>252</sup> *On the Trinity* 4.9.12. Augustine does emphasize God's role in salvation, but he does not see believers as being passive. They must cling to the truth in order to live righteously. *On the Trinity* 8.7.10.

emphasized the unity of the Godhead and thus the equality of the Son and Spirit with the Father, his theology does not eliminate subordination (even if he avoids the term) but relies on it to describe how the incarnation effected salvation for all who would believe in Jesus Christ.

As Robert Jenson points out, one of the problems with Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity is that he separated the economic and immanent Trinity.<sup>253</sup> This in part stems from Augustine's view that God accommodates himself to human understanding and how he is revealed in history is not necessarily who he is in himself. For example, Augustine's belief in the simplicity of God left no room for distinctions and perhaps unwittingly led away from the Nicene belief. "When the Nicenes called the Trinity as such God, they so named him *because* of the triune relations; when Augustine calls the Trinity as such God, it is *in spite* of them."<sup>254</sup> This loss of the distinctions continues in the West after Augustine for theologians who accept simplicity as essential to God. Although Augustine can adopt the personal language of the Trinity, he cannot escape the monadism to which divine simplicity ultimately leads. Compounding this problem, as Thompson and Plantinga point out, is that divine simplicity is not biblical, but a product of natural theology.<sup>255</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A survey of Scripture and the patristics finds statements of equality and subordination of the Son to the Father placed alongside one another with no indication that the writers believed there to be a logical inconsistency. Though it could be argued that this is a result of the occasional nature of many of these writings, it is still significant that this is not a point of

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<sup>253</sup> Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 116.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>255</sup> Thompson and Plantinga, 187. They also argue that those who accept divine simplicity as Christian use it to accuse social Trinitarians of tritheism.

contention for the early church and when it is addressed in later centuries the emphasis is on subordination of nature or essence and not the elimination of all subordination. In the Gospel of John, which has as its central theme the deity of the Son, the subordination of the Son to the Father at least occurs in the pre-incarnate and incarnate Son.<sup>256</sup> While the doctrine of the Trinity is evident in Scripture, very little directly addresses the immanent Trinity. In addition, the Bible presents subordination in a positive way, particularly when defined as obeying the authority of another. It does not indicate that obedience is a sign of ontological inferiority, but rather should be for Christians an expression of love. The Bible does speak strongly against abusive authority.

Until the fourth century, the church fathers, primarily in the East, accept at least an implied subordination in their understanding of the Father and the Son. Their emphasis initially is on the economic Trinity, which is to be expected because this is the emphasis of Scripture. Although some, such as Justin, Tertullian, or most notably Origen might use language that would indicate ontological subordination, their overall teaching affirms the deity of the Son. However, in defending Christianity from internal and external attacks, these theologians faced an increasing need to explain how one God could be Father, Son, and Spirit and philosophy provided both language and ideas. This opened the way for philosophy to interpret theology and the metaphysical explanations and speculations in some cases overshadowed or obscured the emphases and clear teaching of Scripture.

The interplay between philosophy and Christian theology was never more evident than in the writings of Origen. Despite the difficulties presented in his theology, he contributes the important doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, although it requires Athanasius and the Cappadocians to rid it of its reliance on belief in the eternality of matter. The eternal generation

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<sup>256</sup> For example, “the Father gave his only Son” (Jn. 3:16); “to do ... the will of him who sent me” (Jn. 6:38); “...you have sent me...” (Jn. 17:21); “... the Son himself will also be subjected ...” (1 Cor. 15:28)

of the Son from the Father brings together equality of essence and subordination in that the Son is generated by and from the Father and the priority of the Father as the source of being. If the understanding of the eternal generation is lost, the doctrine of the Trinity collapses into tritheism, modalism, or subordinationism.

Arius and his followers rejected any sense of equality between the Father and Son. The Arian controversy centered in part over whether the divine names indicated essence. Perhaps perceiving the difficulty in defending this position, the Arians sought to change the name of the Father to *Ingenerate* because this emphasized the distinction and minimized the relationship between the Father and the Son. However, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, and others who defended orthodoxy rightly saw that the divine names do not reveal ontology, but relationship, and the consistent interpretation of this relationship is that the Son is from the same essence as the Father, and thus equal, and the Father is the source of all being and in this sense alone greater. In addition, the Father is eternally the Father and therefore must eternally beget the Son.

The Father as the fountainhead is maintained throughout this period even by the Arians. The early church fathers interpret this to mean that the Father is the begetter of the Son and the source of the purposes for creation but with the understanding that this is his role as Father and that the Son's role as the begotten and the agent of creation and redemption does not make him less of a divine being and in fact demonstrates his equality because he not only wills to do all the Father wills, but does it. As Irenaeus noted, there can only be one God in the Christian conception of a God who is eternal, omnipotent, and absolutely free. That is why simple addition of another God would not do without destroying this understanding of God. There cannot be two

or more who are God in the same way. Although it implies subordination, the distinction of begetter and begotten was crucial to understanding God as revealed in scripture.

In this distinction, the fathers also see the Son's role as revealer of the Father. For fallen humanity, the incapacity to know God means that there is no hope of redemption and fulfilling the purpose of creation, which is to be a part of the divine community. For many of the early church fathers, knowledge of God was the key to salvation, but it was a knowledge that came from faith and produced love. But finite humanity could not know the transcendent, infinite God sufficiently for salvation, and any attempt to grasp God in human words and thoughts is nothing but idolatry. The point of Trinitarian theology is that the only Word that can capture God is the Word of God, the image of God, the Son. This is not idolatry because the Son is God. Though the church fathers did not know how this could be true, they knew that it was true and knew that the loss of this truth meant the loss of salvation.

The self-revelation of God, however, was not enough for humanity in bondage to sin. Sin is not mere disobedience, but rebellion against God. The payment of a penalty and the self-revelation of God are important, but what must also occur is the deification of human nature. Although the early church knew that only God could save in the way that he did, Athanasius is the one who uses this high soteriology to argue effectively against Arian subordination. For the incomprehensible Father to reveal himself, he sent his Son and his Son willingly came and became human uniting the divine and human natures, deifying the latter for the benefit of all humanity. To accomplish his tasks, the Son had to be fully God or there is no uniting of the natures, there is no true revelation of God, and no full payment of the sin penalty. Humanity would have remained fallen. The divine names point to the equality of essence and subordination of relationship, both of which are essential for salvation.

None of the church fathers denies that there is subordination of the incarnate Son, although most of the scriptural evidence is attributed by them to the Son's human nature or to the economy. The mere act of adding human nature lowered the Son even though his divine nature was not lessened. Prior to the incarnation, it is at minimum an act of humility by the divine Son to do the Father's will and become human. The Cappadocians do want to avoid any notion that his willing obedience is compelled or part of his nature. It is an act of his will, although like his generation, this is an aligning of his will with the Father's will that transcends time. The obedience in his life demonstrated his righteousness, which gives example and assurance that the debt has been paid by God himself.

There is a movement through the early centuries of the church as the language and understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is developed. The Gnostic subordinationism and polytheism faced in the second century could be refuted using arguments based more on the direct teaching of Scripture, but the modalism and Arian subordinationism posed greater challenges because evidence for both views could be found in Scripture and a "Trinitarian" doctrine properly qualified could be interpreted consistently with these errors. At the heart of the Arian controversy is ontological subordination of the Son, and the Arians connected any Scripture that portrayed the Son as weak, humble, or subservient with the Son's nature. In answering the Arians, the Cappadocians and Augustine increasingly emphasized the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit rather than their distinction. For Augustine, all three Persons shared equally in the work of the others and all three could take human form. Prior to Augustine, one of the strengths of the orthodox position had been that only the Trinity could have accomplished the salvation of the world, indicating the necessary contribution of each Person (e.g., the transcendent Father sends, the Son reveals, and the Spirit sanctifies). The Augustinian focus on

the unity of God, especially in response to Arianism, obscures the threeness of God and detracts from the uniqueness of the Son and the soteriological necessity of the Trinity.

Hilary of Portier seems to articulate best a doctrine of the Trinity that incorporates the teaching of Scripture and the theological understanding developed in the East and West. As Athanasius had done, Hilary sees the vital connection between the Trinity and soteriology. He maintains the transcendence of the Father,<sup>257</sup> salvation in the knowledge of the Father, and the full revelation of the Father in the incarnate Word. Knowledge, however, does not simply provide an example to follow, because the tragedy of sin must be overcome by the God who loves those who have sinned against him. Only one who will come himself is worthy to be called God. Therefore, the Son, who can come, must also be God to reveal the Father who is God and cannot come. Unlike Augustine, Hilary is preserving this more Eastern distinction and thus can more readily express the distinction between the Father and the Son and write about the Son's obedience to the Father. This allows Hilary to be more consistent with the direct teaching of Scripture and to develop more fully this obedience, which is in no respect oppression. Rather it is a voluntary obedience in which the Son aligns his will with the will of the Father. The omnipotence of the Son is demonstrated in that he can accept human nature without being diminished and that he can do whatever the omnipotent Father directs.

Hilary brings out the key points in understanding the relationship of the Father and the Son: (1) the equality of essence or nature; (2) seeing obedience or subordination in the roles of the Persons; and (3) seeing subordination or obedience as always voluntary. Because he sees the soteriological significance of the Trinity, he retains the distinctions. Although Augustine does

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<sup>257</sup> The transcendence of the Father follows from the biblical view of the transcendence of God, who the early church usually read in Scripture as being the Father. It can be seen in the use of "holy" to describe God; the encounters with God (e.g., Moses and the burning bush and the annual divine visit to the Holy of Holies in the temple); and the warning that no one could see God and live (Ex. 33:20). It was not a limitation on the Father's part, but a limitation on our part.



not exploit this connection between theology and soteriology, he does emphasize the crucial element of love. Equating will with love and identifying both with the work of the Spirit, he articulates the environment within which the Father and Son relate. The Father as the source and the one who wills does so in perfect love for the Son, and the Son who is begotten and who does the will of his Father does so in perfect love. It is in this manner that the subordination of relationships escapes any notions of tyranny, slavery, or oppression that would be expected in subordination among human beings.

## CHAPTER III. SUBORDINATION AND THE OBEDIENCE OF THE SON IN THE THEOLOGY OF P. T. FORSYTH

### INTRODUCTION

As outlined and discussed in the previous chapter, Christian theology has had a longstanding aversion to the term “subordinationism”, an aversion traced to the church’s earliest theological controversies that threatened the very foundation of the fledgling community of faith. In the fourth century, the church at the Council of Nicaea rejected Arian subordinationism that left the Son as exalted but created and, therefore, a lesser being than God the Father. Athanasius, the great defender of the faith, saw the integral connection between the atonement and the deity of Christ – only God can save and impart to his followers the divine life and only that which is *ὁμοούσιος* with the Father can mediate knowledge of the Father. Though the role of the Spirit would be worked out more fully at a later time, Athanasius argued the essential relationship of soteriology and the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> At stake was not merely metaphysical or philosophical hairsplitting regarding the immanent relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, but the very heart of the gospel. There could be no cross that had the eternal power to judge, forgive, and transform unless it was an act of God and by God. Thus, any theology that leaves the Son and Spirit as lesser beings than the Father has rightly been rejected as heretical throughout church history. All Christian theology collapses if the Father, Son, and Spirit are not equal in essence or nature.

Theologians have acknowledged the overt subordinate statements of Jesus in Scripture often attributing them to an economic subordination necessitated by the incarnation. While this does limit these statements to the economy thereby keeping essential subordinationism out of the

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<sup>1</sup> Athanasius writes about the *ὁμοούσιος* of the Spirit in his first, third, and fourth dogmatic letters to Serapion. (Robertson, “Prolegomena”, *NPNF*, second series, vol. 4, lvii).

immanent Trinity, it does not address the question regarding what the subordination so evident in the incarnation indicates about intra-Trinitarian relations. The incarnate Son of God could not become less, even temporarily, in such a way as to cease to be God nor could he become more and thus superior to the Father and Spirit. In what way then is the economic subordination of the Son reflected in the immanent Trinity without resulting in essential subordination? If subordination can only be understood as a subordination of essence, the witness of Scripture and the doctrine of the Trinity are incompatible. But is subordination of essence the only understanding of subordination or can another understanding of subordination in intra-Trinitarian relationships provide insight for an integrated understanding of God, Christianity, and the world?

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century, British theologian and churchman P. T. Forsyth found a meaning of subordination indispensable to a proper understanding of God and the entire Christian message. For Forsyth, without this subordination, there could be no atonement because the atonement required the perfect obedience of the Son to the Father and obedience requires subordination. No subordination, no atonement, no Christianity. If salvation is the exclusive act of the Godhead, the required obedience could not come from the human nature of the incarnate Son. This chapter will examine Forsyth's understanding of "subordination" and his overall view of the relationship of the Father and the Son and how he saw no contradiction between the eternal subordination of the Son and the essential equality of the three Persons of the Trinity.

To understand Forsyth, one must understand not only the context of his life and thought, but also how he critiqued, corrected, and melded the contributions of others into his own. This chapter will begin with a brief biography followed by a discussion of the theological influences in his life and his overall approach to theology. His approach to theology and theological expression are particularly important in understanding his thought. Though Forsyth did not write

a systematic theology nor did he write systematically, his writings nevertheless articulate a unique approach founded in his understanding of the divine revelation that gave overall coherence to his writings. Because Forsyth cannot be properly understood without understanding this approach, this chapter will include Forsyth's foundational understanding of who God is and how from this understanding the rest of his thoughts flow.

The unsystematic nature and size of Forsyth's *corpus* makes it difficult to draw out his theology on topics like the Trinity. It is easy to read one passage from his work on a particular topic in which he might strongly criticize a position only to find in other works (and even in other locations in the same work) another passage in which he lauds the position, seeing its value when placed in its proper context. As a result, attempts will be made to interact with all relevant works to gain a full understanding of what he believed and how his beliefs connected to the rest of his theology.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Biography**

P. T. Forsyth was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, on May 12, 1848, the son of a postman, which meant that he grew up in poverty.<sup>2</sup> Plagued much of his life with poor health, he more than compensated with a strong mind and a passion to know Christ in His fullness and to proclaim what he experienced to the church and the world.

At 16, Forsyth won a bursary to attend Aberdeen University to study the classics intending to become a pastor. He was an excellent student earning first-class honors in classical

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<sup>2</sup> Donald G. Miller, *P. T. Forsyth—the man, the preachers' theologian, prophet for the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a contemporary assessment*, (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), 5.

literature.<sup>3</sup> With a strong interest in theology, he studied under Albrecht Ritschl in Göttingen for a semester where he also learned German and developed a strong interest in German theologians.<sup>4</sup> He returned to England and studied at Hackney College in London before beginning his pastoral duties.

From the beginning of his pastoral ministries, he was a maverick aligning himself against the status quo in his denomination. He also had a keen interest in the community actively participating in the political and social issues that confronted 19<sup>th</sup> century England. His broad knowledge is reflected in his writings through numerous references to art, literature, music, and the like.

Forsyth married in 1877 and had his only child shortly thereafter. He served several churches as pastor beginning with a church in Hackney, a suburb of London, and ending at Emmanuel Church in Cambridge in 1894. His wife died a week after he arrived at Cambridge. He would remarry in 1898.

In 1896, Forsyth delivered his sermon “God, the Holy Father” to the Congregational Union where he publicly declared what had become and would increasingly be the foundation of his future theological development.

Five years later, Forsyth was named principal of Hackney College, and for the next 20 years, he would expound more fully in writings and lectures on his theology and its impact on the church and the world. During World War I while many liberal theologians struggled with the horror of one Christian nation warring against another, Forsyth’s theology developed years earlier enabled him to address profoundly the tragedies of war.

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<sup>3</sup> W. L. Bradley, *P. T. Forsyth: The Man and His Work*, (London: Independent Press, 1952), 18.

<sup>4</sup> A. M. Hunter, *P. T. Forsyth*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 15.

Until his death November 11, 1921, Forsyth outlined a path in a rapidly changing world that allowed the church to have a theology that was true to the Christian message and relevant to the world even amid great tragedy.

### **Theological “Conversion”**

For the first half of his life, P. T. Forsyth followed the path of Protestant liberalism that many theologians and pastors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had accepted as true Christianity. Liberal theology had largely secularized the Christian message identifying it with human love, human progress, and human brotherhood. God was the loving father of all humanity. Jesus and his cross, when it was mentioned, had inaugurated a new kingdom and served as the supreme example of love. As articulated by G. W. F. Hegel, humanity in history through the work of the Spirit was now evolving into the full realization of this kingdom. Western Europe, in particular, was a prime example of the evolving kingdom of God. Early on, Forsyth admittedly was a proponent of this view of Christianity but soon began a gradual move away from it, influenced at first by Ritschl.<sup>5</sup>

Decades before World War I would shatter the dominance of Protestant liberalism, Forsyth began to see the folly and danger of this theology. He had the insight and foresight to see that the main beliefs and practices of the Christianity of his day had either run their course or were leading Christianity, and thus the fate of the world, away from the new kingdom inaugurated by Christ on the cross and from the purpose and ministry of the church. He espoused positions that he believed were correctives but that were not tied to a particular denomination or belief system, which left him open to attack from all or to be regarded as irrelevant. Forsyth went to Christianity past, not from a simplistic desire to re-establish a lost tradition or to rediscover the

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<sup>5</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, (1907; reprint Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998), *Biblical and Theological Classics Library Series*, 179.

true church, but to recapture what the church was losing – the holiness of God and the indispensable message and activity of the cross. His focus, however, was on the future, and his desire was that the church would move into its future, not simply carrying the cross but clinging to it.<sup>6</sup> As that clinging to the cross with all its accompanying notions of holiness, forgiveness, sin, love, and redemption empowered the church, the church could through Christ change the world. Just prior to the bloodiest century in human history, this Congregationalist pastor and scholar knew that the diluted gospel preached by the liberal churches was becoming increasingly irrelevant in the modern world, not because the gospel was outdated, but because the most important part had been left behind.

This development was not merely intellectual, but personal and spiritual. He would later summarize the transformation this way: “I immersed myself in the Logic of Hegel, and corrected it by the theology of Paul, and its continuity in the Reformation, because I was all the time being corrected and humiliated by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> Though he made few autobiographical references in his writing, as Forsyth expounds his theology it is apparent that behind his beliefs was a transforming encounter with God that confirmed for him what he knew to be true. He said he did not understand the cross “till God taught me what sin was and the theology of its cure.”<sup>8</sup> His pastoral experience also had a profound effect as he realized the scholarly theology that he loved did not address the immediate needs of his congregation. His congregation needed a “personal religion” that came from an encounter with the holy God through the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

But, fortunately for me, I was not condemned to the mere scholar’s cloistered life. I could not treat the matter as an academic quest. I was kept close to practical conditions. I was in

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<sup>6</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority in Relation to Certainty, Sanctity, and Society: an Essay in the Philosophy of Experimental Religion*, (n. d.; reprint London: Independent Press, 1952), 35-37.

<sup>7</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 179.

<sup>8</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Revelation Old and New: Sermons and Addresses*, (Independent Press: London, 1962), 78.

<sup>9</sup> McCurdy, Leslie, *Attributes and Atonement: The Holy Love of God in the Theology of P. T. Forsyth*, (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1999), 29-31.

a relation of life, duty, and responsibility for others. I could not contemplate conclusions without asking how they would affect these people, and my word to them, in doubt, death, grief, or repentance.<sup>10</sup>

In this same passage, Forsyth also notes that beyond the local church, people in “the Church at large ... were in no spiritual condition to have forced on them those questions on which scholars so delighted and differed.”<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, though, it was his return to the Bible where he discovered the divine revelation of God’s holiness and grace that convicted him of his sin “in a way that submerged all the school questions in weight, urgency, and poignancy. I was turned from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace.”<sup>12</sup> That discovery was to see Christ not simply as suffering on the cross for him, but being under the judgment and “the chastisement of my peace.”<sup>13</sup> So profound was this experience that Forsyth would later write that the only evidence for the truth of the gospel that matters is a transforming faith through which believers know Christ the Redeemer in a way that is as or more real than anything else they experience.<sup>14</sup>

Experience is not the authority, but authority must be experienced, which meant faith in Jesus Christ. It was not an either-or but a proper ordering of the two.<sup>15</sup> Forsyth believed that Schleiermacher had inverted the order, making experience prior, and that Ritschl had corrected the error by placing divine revelation before human experience.<sup>16</sup> In other words it was the human experience of the divine revelation that was most important. “The essential thing is the

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<sup>10</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 177.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>14</sup> *Authority*, 20-22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> *Revelation*, 74.



object of faith, not the subject of the experience”.<sup>17</sup> The continuing influence of this experience on Forsyth must always be considered when studying his theology.

Hinging in large part on his recovery of grace in his life and theology, Forsyth’s “conversion” happened gradually over a period, but by 1891 it was evidenced clearly in his writings.<sup>18</sup> In his chairman’s address to the Congregational Union that year, Forsyth stated, “No sin has hampered us like our own. . . . We can never trust our breezy selves again. We have all our world and all our hope to reconstruct at the foot of the Cross.”<sup>19</sup> Though gradual and at times described by Forsyth as more a change of emphasis, it was nevertheless dramatic.<sup>20</sup> The problem with the theology that he had previously embraced was not just that it was too scholarly and philosophical. It had replaced the transcendent otherness of God with an extreme immanence that equated the divine with ideal humanity. Forsyth’s solution was not to repeat the error by replacing immanence with transcendence. Holiness did not replace love but was seen as its source. Love issued from the holiness of God. It was a particular kind of love – holy love.<sup>21</sup>

### **Theological Influences**

The factors that influenced Forsyth were numerous. He was well read in fields beyond theology and had a great appreciation and understanding of art and music. As mentioned he had studied under Ritschl, read other German theologians, and had been one of only a few British

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>18</sup> Trevor Hart, “Morality, Atonement and the Death of Jesus: The Crucial Focus of Forsyth’s theology”, in *Justice the True and Only Mercy*, ed. Hart, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 17. Miller, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Bradley, 46. Quoting from Forsyth’s chairman’s address “The Old Faith and the New” (1891), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford S. Pitt, *Church Ministry and Sacraments: A Critical Evaluation of the Thought of Peter Taylor Forsyth*, (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1983), xvi-xvii.

<sup>21</sup> In his thorough study of Forsyth’s use of “holy love”, McCurdy notes that Forsyth popularized but did not originate the phrase. (McCurdy, 5)

theologians to have read Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>22</sup> Some scholars believe that Forsyth's fondness for and use of paradox came from his readings of Kierkegaard. As a Congregationalist, Forsyth drew heavily, but not uncritically, from Anabaptist and Calvinistic sources.<sup>23</sup> He was also a student of church history and was influenced by the early church fathers in particular. His time as a pastor undoubtedly contributed not only to his writing style, but also to the practical bent of his theology. As with his concerns about Christianity and the state of the world, Forsyth not only criticized, but also found value in all that he encountered.

One difficulty in determining the influences on Forsyth's thoughts is that he does not frequently cite sources. For Miller, this was to be expected because Forsyth "took other men's ideas and gave them the stamp of his own enrichment, and frequently pioneered new terrain where others had not trod."<sup>24</sup> As Bradley puts it, "... for those ideas which he adopts become his own and reappear only after they have become a part of his very nature."<sup>25</sup>

Because of the paucity of citations, scholars have speculated on who influenced Forsyth. Bradley's caution about this speculation is well advised, and one should look first to those to whom Forsyth gives the most credit: Frederick Denison Maurice and Ritschl.<sup>26</sup> Bradley sees similarities between Forsyth and Maurice's positions regarding the definition of a sect, the church, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Maurice's most significant contribution to Forsyth's theology, according to Bradley, is his view of a universal humanity, a racial solidarity. Christ is Lord and Creator of a new humanity, a new race constituted in and through Him alone.<sup>27</sup> Despite

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<sup>22</sup> In addition to Kierkegaard and Ritschl, Pitt adds Immanuel Kant. (xxv) Russell acknowledges Forsyth's opposition to Hegel, but also finds Forsyth appropriating Hegelian thought in the effects of the gospel but not in the core of redemption. (Stanley Russell, "Spoiling the Egyptians: P T Forsyth and Hegel", in *Justice the True and Only Mercy*, 236) Bradley offers an in-depth analysis of the influences on Forsyth. (90-110)

<sup>23</sup> Pitt, xxi.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley, 91.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

these traces of Maurice's thoughts in Forsyth's writings, Bradley concludes it might be better to think of Maurice's lasting influence on Forsyth as inspirational rather than intellectual.<sup>28</sup>

Although Albrecht Ritschl, under whom Forsyth studied in 1872, had a profound effect on Forsyth's theology, Forsyth eventually criticized and moved beyond his teacher. Ritschl's influence can be seen in Forsyth's focus on the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ as well as an emphasis on ethics. One can hear Ritschl in Forsyth's critique of mysticism and metaphysics. But he differs from his teacher in three ways: (1) seeing the cross as the center of Christianity, not one of two poles in an ellipse;<sup>29</sup> (2) recapturing the significance of the atonement; and (3) holding together, not severing other parts of Christianity, but emphasizing what is most important for the day. An example of the third difference, which will be discussed later, is that Forsyth does not reject mysticism and metaphysics but acknowledges their value and contribution to Christianity.<sup>30</sup> At a point in the church's history they were primary concerns. But in his day, he saw the problems that an emphasis on metaphysics and mysticism caused and he wanted to move the emphasis to the moral and ethical, which he saw as primary.<sup>31</sup> Another example is his warning against disconnecting the Spirit and the Word (humanity's inspired confession of the gospel), which church history had shown to result in spiritualism or rationalism.<sup>32</sup>

Where Forsyth sees Ritschl's greatest deficiencies is in the theologian's view of the atonement. Ritschl did theologically what Hegel had done philosophically – "emptying the reconciliation idea of the idea of the atonement".<sup>33</sup> By doing so, reconciliation was no longer

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>29</sup> When he spoke of two poles, they were the reconciliation and redemption of the cross. (*Positive Preaching*, 204-205)

<sup>30</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion: Two Lectures*, (London: Independent Press, 1952), 30.

<sup>31</sup> *Revelation*, 131.

<sup>32</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, (1912; reprint London: Independent Press, 1955), 29, 42.

<sup>33</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), 66.

interpersonal and only man needed to be reconciled.<sup>34</sup> For Forsyth, reconciliation had to be personal on both sides and required reconciliation from both sides, which is why atonement was required and that atonement was through Jesus Christ and the cross.<sup>35</sup> In fact, for Ritschl the effect the atonement had on humanity was much more significant than the effect it had on God.<sup>36</sup> God should only be conceived of as love, and concepts of holiness should be set aside. After all, Ritschl believed God's anger was a misconception on humanity's part.<sup>37</sup> Although the younger Forsyth preached sermons that were strongly in support of these views, as he matured he began to see the defects in Ritschl's theology and saw the importance of holiness as the source of God's love. In a later work on prayer, Forsyth would criticize Ritschl's words, "Love to God has no sphere of action outside love to our brother".<sup>38</sup> Again, this was an anthropocentric position the younger Forsyth would have held, but in his later years, he repeatedly pointed out how this view reduced God, his divine love, the cross, and the kingdom.<sup>39</sup> Forsyth clearly moved beyond Ritschl, but that is not to say that Ritschl did not have a profound effect. Bradley, who has an extensive analysis of Ritschl's impact on Forsyth, writes that the most lasting contribution is the emphasis on the moral and the significance of the active will.<sup>40</sup>

Of all the influences on Forsyth's theology, none was greater than the New Testament itself. Forsyth criticized those who took a literal view of Scripture and believed that higher criticism had demonstrated the Bible to be deficient in certain areas. But he still had a high view

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>36</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Lectures on the Church and Sacraments*, (London: Longmans, Green, 1917; reprint as *The Church and the Sacraments*, [London: Independent Press, 1953]), 88.

<sup>37</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, (1909; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 131.

<sup>38</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*, (1916; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), electronic version [http://www.ccel.org/f/forsyth/prayer/soul\\_of\\_prayer.htm](http://www.ccel.org/f/forsyth/prayer/soul_of_prayer.htm), accessed 25 March 2005, 15.

<sup>39</sup> *Faith*, 274. P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, 1897; reprint London: Independent Press, 1957), 25ff. P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy*, (1916; reprint London: Independent Press, 1948), 36.

<sup>40</sup> Bradley, 106.

of Scripture that stemmed from his understanding that it was the way God chose to communicate the gospel, which for Forsyth was the true authority in the Bible. In fact, he states that “I do not believe in verbal inspiration .... But the true minister ought to find the words and phrases of the Bible so full of spiritual food and felicity that he has some difficulty in not believing in verbal inspiration.”<sup>41</sup> He was willing to allow scholars to question the validity of just about everything in Scripture except the gospel.<sup>42</sup> This seemingly arbitrary exception should be expected given that he believed he had personally experienced the transforming power of the gospel and because of that knew it to be true. But even more so, he saw this experience paralleled in the history of the church that even in the setting of the canon “the guiding principle was the evangelical principle of Redemption”.<sup>43</sup> Forsyth knew that any other principle would result in the church editing the Bible according to its needs, interests, or preferences thereby placing the Bible under the authority of man.<sup>44</sup>

The New Testament was Christ’s interpretation of himself through the Holy Spirit to the apostles, a record of redemption, and the whole counsel of God, making it indispensable. As the only inspired interpretation of the work of Christ, the New Testament should not be set aside and the gospel contained within was the standard by which all else was judged.<sup>45</sup> The apostles were inspired when writing about the work of Christ, because the Christ who lived in them spoke through them. On this matter, the Bible was infallible.<sup>46</sup> He again appeals to human experience because the apostles did not interpret Jesus’ teachings, but interpreted from a transformational experience with the person of Christ.

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<sup>41</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Authority*, 252.

<sup>43</sup> *Person and Place*, 129.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130.

<sup>45</sup> *Authority*, 153-154. *Person and Place*, 152.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 155, 179.

They worked with His person as itself the message, and the final message. They worked with a faith which was not a piece of impressionism but the worship of their new creator, and which therefore did not fade as an impression does, but grew as a new life.<sup>47</sup>

Forsyth draws together the work of the Spirit, the work of Christ, and human experience not only in the writing of Scripture, but also in the reading and interpreting of it. For the reader, the Bible is the medium for the Holy Spirit like the sun acting more powerfully through a lens to regenerate souls.<sup>48</sup> But the authority remains with the gospel that miraculously creates the Christian experience. "Christian experience is the experience of the authority of the Gospel; it is not an experience which becomes the authority for the Gospel; whose authority can be most mighty when every reason drawn from human experience is against it."<sup>49</sup>

The gospel for Forsyth is Jesus Christ, though his focus is clearly on the atoning work of Christ on the cross whereby humanity and God have been reconciled finally and forever. All other influences were examined in the light of the cross and used only if they passed the test and were useful in helping to better understand and communicate the gospel. Though he did indeed drink from many sources, all had to be filtered by the gospel for it was the gospel that was the divine revelation and where all theology had to begin and end.

### **Theological Approach**

Forsyth has been criticized for his style of writing that often sounds more like a sermon than theological writings customary in the academy. In addition to his scarce use of citations, his use of paradox, imprecise use of terms, and unsystematic way of writing make his works difficult to read and understand. But Forsyth himself provides the reason. He did not intend to write a systematic theology that would benefit only the scholarly. He wrote in the spirit of the Pauline

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<sup>47</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), 21.

<sup>48</sup> *Faith*, 33-34.

<sup>49</sup> *Authority*, 378.

epistles that had radically changed his life – to address the most pressing need of the church for the day. His project was not to repeat the error of the past by codifying or systematizing his or some other interpretation of Scripture nor would he repeat the error of the present and replace past interpretations with a new theology that omitted the heart of the gospel.<sup>50</sup> He had assessed the need of the day, and he communicated the solution, not with the cool, reserved objectivity of a scholar, but with the passion of one whose life had been transformed by the grace of God. The message, in part, was in the delivery. The church's error and potential consequences needed to be addressed with great urgency. The church could not settle comfortably into the kingdom, satisfied that its work was done, but needed to be roused to continue to be on mission. A purely intellectual discussion would have simply been added to the others to be dissected and analyzed. It would not have produced the actions that were required. Convincing sick people who are convinced they are healthy that they are in fact about to die requires action, not deliberation. It was not merely intellectually understanding that God's holiness and the cross of Christ must be central to Christianity, but encountering Jesus Christ, as Forsyth had, in a way that convicted of sin and transformed lives.

Though his writing style can be difficult, it is easier to understand if one understands his overall approach to theology. Like Ritschl, he wants to begin with the revelation, but unlike his teacher, he rejects outright very little. This is one of the most significant differences between the two. Forsyth wants to hold together the revelation even when it appears to be paradoxical or in a logical tension, because he has seen how others have distorted the truth by rejecting part of it.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Forsyth argues that even codifying Christ's precepts will only lead to a new legalism. (*A Holy Church: The Moral Guide of Society: An Address Delivered in the City Temple, Holborn Viaduct, on Tuesday, May 9, 1905*, [London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1905], 15)

<sup>51</sup> Miller has a similar view. "[Forsyth] saw dangers in half-truths which excluded equally valid counterparts and sought to grasp truth as a living whole." (Miller, 20) See also *Work of Christ*, 221.

He does not resort to Hegelian synthesis but sees theology more as revolving rather than evolving.

The higher we go the more polygonal the truth is. Thesis and antithesis are both true. But their reconciliation lies, not as Hegel said, with a superfinned rationalism, in a higher truth which is also of the reason, but in a supreme and absolute personality, in whom the antinomies *work*.<sup>52</sup>

There is movement, for example, in his understanding of the atonement, but even here he concedes that there might come a time when an older theory will have to be re-emphasized.<sup>53</sup>

And he does not attempt to find balance or some *via media* but allows the tension to remain.

Rather, as earlier stated, Forsyth emphasizes what is required by the need of the day.<sup>54</sup> That has been one of the strengths of Christianity, and Forsyth recognized that.<sup>55</sup> He believed “We do not touch the deep illogical things of God till we find paradox their only expression.”<sup>56</sup>

That is what can be exasperating about Forsyth for those who want him to make a choice. He does make a choice, but the choice is most often not to invalidate or discredit what others have done. The operative principle is to choose to emphasize what is most needed for the day. As he writes in *Cruciality of the Cross*, “Preach the total Christ therefore in the perspective of evangelical faith, but with immediate stress on that aspect most required by the conscience of the hour.”<sup>57</sup> For example, when he discusses the dangers of pietism, he acknowledges that it arose in the face of a dead orthodoxy, the time when it was needed most. Though he knew the

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<sup>52</sup> *Person and Place*, 71.

<sup>53</sup> Forsyth sees in evolution the presupposition that newer is better, which meant it was against humility as each generation looked down on the previous ones. It overemphasized the current and the individual disconnecting them from the past and future. ( “Some Christian Aspects of Evolution”, *London Quarterly Review* 104 (October 1905): 209-39; reprint, *Christian Aspects of Evolution*, [Norwich: Epworth, 1950], 30) In *Christian Ethic of War*, he notes how in a world that is not yet Christian the church must at time “fall back on an inferior ethic” if necessary to defeat those who would work against the kingdom. ([1916; reprint Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1999], 22)

<sup>54</sup> Forsyth’s critique of the Quaker position on World War I is an example. (*Ibid.*, 95)

<sup>55</sup> He warned the church not to choose political sides so that it could remain relevant and focused on its purpose of advancing the kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel. (Bradley, 71-72)

<sup>56</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 187. Also *Soul of Prayer*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> *Cruciality*, 83.



overemphasis on individualistic faith was hurting the church, he also knew that faith in Jesus Christ was an individual and racial act.<sup>58</sup> Several times he acknowledges that a belief or practice might be appropriate in certain circumstances at the individual level, but inappropriate as the general view or practice of the church and vice versa.<sup>59</sup> With metaphysics, he acknowledged the contribution that had been made in centuries prior but the need of the day was more practical and ethical. Other examples include his treatment of Roman Catholicism, sectarianism, the state church, anti-intellectualism, the social gospel, revivalism, individualistic views of salvation, biblicism, and nearly every other facet of Christianity that he confronted. His correctives were an attempt to hold these beliefs and practices together, but subjugating them all to the holiness of God and the gospel. In fact, despite his obvious and profound dissatisfaction with the state of Christianity in nearly every form that he encountered, he nevertheless was extremely inclusive regarding which groups constituted the church.<sup>60</sup>

What he does battle against are contemporaries who fail to see what needs to be emphasized either by holding on to outmoded ideas or leaving behind what is essential to Christianity. The dominant Christian theology of his day wanted to de-contextualize love from the gospel, leaving it open to be interpreted at best as a supreme form of humanity. This led to an ambiguity that endangered the church and the world. The emphasis should not be on love, but on holiness. Love was not rejected but seen as flowing from holiness. Forsyth knew the error in not only his opponents' conclusions, but also their approach. He takes great care in his writings not to repeat either error.

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<sup>58</sup> *Justification*, 55-56.

<sup>59</sup> An example of latter is found in his position on the church's right to resist the state, a right not afforded to the individual. (*War*, 65) With regards to action as confessing, see *Faith*, 220-222. Another example is in his understanding that while an individual person does not necessarily have to understand the atonement to benefit from it, the church must. (*Cruciality*, 81)

<sup>60</sup> He believed the Free Churches and Anglican Church could unite around the common belief in the cross and the common task of establishing the kingdom. (*Congregationalism*, 21-22; *Faith*, 308-309)

### Theological Foundation

Though Forsyth did not write systematically, his later writings were unified by a central thought, which provided a foundation for all he wrote – the primacy of the holiness of God and the atoning cross of Jesus Christ, the singular, most complete expression of that holiness. Forsyth made his prophetic call to the church to return to the cross and the sin, judgment, forgiveness, atonement, and holy love evident there. The cross is the starting point of the gospel and as such where the church should begin, return, take its bearings, and proceed.<sup>61</sup> Protestant liberalism had moved the church away from its unique, vital, God-given purpose and message largely because of a failure to understand the centrality, or in Forsyth's words, the "cruciality", of the cross of Jesus Christ. According to Forsyth, "You do not understand Christ till you understand His cross."<sup>62</sup>

Forsyth believed that Christianity was an ethical religion, and that in fact, the ultimate reality was not philosophical or physical, but moral.<sup>63</sup> The ethics, however, did not derive from objectively contemplating "What would Jesus do?" or following a list of rules or principles.<sup>64</sup> Rather, the ethics emerged from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that began and, in many respects, remained at the cross. Because God acted in holy love on humanity's behalf, any reciprocation must be holy, loving, and ethical.

This overview of Forsyth is important in understanding his theology. His working class upbringing and pastoral experience seemed to have helped keep his theology focused on being

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<sup>61</sup> *Cruciality*, 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>63</sup> Hart, "Morality", 18.

<sup>64</sup> Forsyth, P. T., *Christian Perfection*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1899; reprint in *God the Holy Father*, London: Independent Press, 1957), 132. Forsyth criticizes Charles Sheldon by name, which he rarely did in his works.

relevant and beneficial to the common man. He learned from church history the folly of rejecting past doctrine that did not seem relevant for his time and over-correcting perceived errors. Truth about God is eternal truth, and although a doctrine might require being viewed from a different perspective according to different contexts, it did not need to be eliminated or forgotten. This overall approach of holding together the paradoxes of the faith rather than solving them or cutting the logical tension manifests itself throughout Forsyth's writings. He handles these situations in different ways. For example, his desire for theology to be relevant to the entire church rather than just to an intellectual elite does not mean he advocates a simplistic, over-generalized Christianity. Instead, he seeks to express the profundity of the faith in a way that will have the best effect on the world in which he lives. He is not willing to sacrifice truth in the name of pragmatism or relevancy nor is he willing to accept that truth cannot be communicated in a way that the church can understand. Another example is Forsyth's adoption of Ritschl's ethical focus without his former teacher's rejection of the metaphysical that led to the anthropocentric religion that he knew was inadequate. He does not simply accept both positions, but in the tension between the ethical and metaphysical, he emphasizes the one he believes is most relevant for his time. With his understanding of the transcendence and immanence of God, it is not a matter of emphasis, but of the relationship of the holiness of the Father being best expressed in the work of Christ.

Forsyth's approach to theology integrates his beliefs in such a way that it is difficult to focus on one doctrine or one term and understand it without seeing how it is connected to the rest of what he believes. What leads to Forsyth's view on the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father derives from his understanding of the Holy Father revealed by the Son, which he believed the church of his day had forgotten. Therefore, this chapter will look first at his views on the

holiness of God, how humanity's sin was an offense to that holiness, and how the judgment of God could only be satisfied by the obedience of the Son of God. This will then be connected to the atonement where obedience and thus subordination play an integral part.

## **GOD THE HOLY FATHER**

### **Holiness as Foundational to God**

In Forsyth's understanding of God, nothing is more foundational than holiness.

Neither love, grace, faith, nor sin have any but a passing meaning except as they rest on the holiness of God, except as they arise from it, and return to it, except as they satisfy it, show it forth, set it up, and secure it everywhere and for ever. Love is but its outgoing; sin is but its defiance; grace is but its action on sin; the cross is but its victory; faith is but its worship.<sup>65</sup>

Holiness does not replace any of these, but it does provide a context and a source to give these words a particular and divine meaning rather than an abstract and human one. Forsyth inextricably links holiness and love but makes holiness primary. "You can go behind love to holiness, but behind holiness you cannot go. ... Any real belief in the Incarnation is a belief in the ultimacy, centrality, and supremacy of holiness for God and man."<sup>66</sup> He calls love the "outward movement" of holiness and asserts that "We may come to holiness by way of love, but we only come to love by reason of holiness."<sup>67</sup> As is typical of his theology, he holds together holiness and love seeing the dangers of over-emphasizing one to the detriment or even loss of the other. The church in the past had emphasized holiness too much, resulting in it being equated with a saintly aloofness that led to a dead orthodoxy marked by legalism. The Reformers would

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<sup>65</sup> *Cruciality*, 39.

<sup>66</sup> *Holy Father*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

later emphasize love only to go too far in the other direction to the detriment of both holiness and love.<sup>68</sup>

While Forsyth's precise definition of holiness is difficult to ascertain, as Gunton points out, his general outline is clear.<sup>69</sup> Holiness is not God, which would result in a depersonalization of God that Forsyth abhorred, but it is fundamental to who he is. "And holiness is the eternal moral power which must do, and do, till it see itself everywhere."<sup>70</sup> Holiness is God's self-revelation that is not merely a message communicated but a revelation that creates and re-creates until all is holy. Because holiness is fundamental to who God is, it is not an external or internal force causing him to reveal. Holiness as self-revelation is simply God being God. It is the "eternal unity of God's free will with His perfect nature" and "the supreme expression of His moral perfection".<sup>71</sup> Holiness attached more to action than essence points toward a conception of God as interested in personal communion as opposed to the distant God of classical theism.

As an eternal moral power, holiness is related to righteousness, terms which McCurdy points out are often used interchangeably by Forsyth.<sup>72</sup> Holiness is the "perfection of God's moral nature" and an "ethic upon the whole eternal scale."<sup>73</sup> But this moral power is not directed toward establishing moral laws or a code of ethics even if they are based on the teachings of Christ.<sup>74</sup> Rather God as holy seeks to make humanity holy by drawing us into a community of holy love, a personal relationship, in which our will is aligned with God's will. In a passage that seems to echo Kierkegaard, Forsyth lays out three stages that people experience when encountering the holy will of God. At first, people passively submit to it though they are largely

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<sup>68</sup> *Congregationalism*, 41.

<sup>69</sup> Colin Gunton, "The Real as Redemptive: Forsyth on Authority and Freedom", in *Justice the True and Only Mercy*, 58.

<sup>70</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 220.

<sup>71</sup> *Holy Church*, 18.

<sup>72</sup> McCurdy, 158.

<sup>73</sup> *Holy Church*, 18.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

ignorant of it. In the second stage, people understand and obey the will because it is rational. The third stage, which Forsyth calls “Righteous”, is when people understand and yield to the holy will not because it makes sense, but because it is holy and good.<sup>75</sup> It is from a growing personal relationship with God through the Spirit, in the third stage, that morality emerges as an expression of who we are becoming rather than obedience to an external code.<sup>76</sup> Ethics and morality in the sense of a code have their place in pointing toward the holy, but the personal relationship with God is what makes humanity holy. The holiness of God is the foundation and “ruling interest of Christianity”<sup>77</sup> and points toward a moral order for the entire universe that consists “in absolute moral authority and a passionate and unswerving opposition to sin and evil in all its forms.”<sup>78</sup>

In the face of sin that rebelled against his holy will, the self-revealing God most fully reveals himself in Jesus Christ on the cross, because holiness is inseparable from judgment, a “necessary reaction to sin” by a holy God.<sup>79</sup> The atonement of the cross is the only possible way for this holiness to be “divinely satisfied”.<sup>80</sup> Forsyth is not saying that God was forced or trapped by his holiness to redeem, because holiness is who He is. When confronted with the sin of humanity, the holy God had two choices – punish or expiate humanity, inflict punishment or assume it.<sup>81</sup> Ignoring sin or forgiving without dealing properly with it would not be consistent with his holiness and would make him untrustworthy, because it is his unchanging holiness that

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<sup>75</sup> *Authority*, 349.

<sup>76</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 128.

<sup>77</sup> *Cruciality*, 38, 39. See also *Authority*, 215.

<sup>78</sup> Hart, “Morality”, 19.

<sup>79</sup> *Cruciality*, 53.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

provides the ground for trusting his love forever.<sup>82</sup> God chose to assume the judgment, thereby making the judgment one of grace to humanity.

The lack of a precise definition is characteristic of the word “holy” itself. Whether in the Hebrew (*kodesh*) or Greek (ἅγιος), the usage has a vagueness to it, referring to that which makes God other than or separate from all else. This had led to an overly transcendent view of God that so removed him from humanity that he had little concern for the daily affairs of his creatures, leaving matters largely in human hands. Such a God understood this way could be contemplated and worshipped from afar, but he could not be related to in a personal, intimate way. Holiness is often defined negatively – e.g., God is not creation – but little is said positively about what it means. Agreeing with this, Forsyth believes that true holiness can only be realized in the soul.<sup>83</sup>

As unsatisfying as an overly transcendent conception of God was to Forsyth, an overemphasis on the immanence of God in a Hegelian sense was even worse. Instead by emphasizing the activity and effect of holiness, Forsyth holds together the transcendence and immanence of God. That which sets God apart necessarily self reveals and thus moves closer to humanity. God is holy; he is other. But in his self-revelation God transforms creation from unholy to holy, to become like him so that God and creatures might share communion. Forsyth had seen how classical theism had defined holiness so as to distance God from humanity thereby missing God’s project of establishing a holy community in which he would be a part. Forsyth had also seen how much of Protestant liberalism had become so enamored with the kingdom that it had lost the sense of the holy God truly being other than his creation. By seeing both otherness and self revelation in holiness, which is best expressed in the term “holy love”, Forsyth does not

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>83</sup> *Authority*, 474-475.

sacrifice the kingdom for the Sovereign and vice versa and he defines holiness in a positive, not negative way. In Forsyth's words, "But if the holiness, do not go out to cover, imbue, conquer, and sanctify all things, if it do not give itself in love, it is the less holy."<sup>84</sup> God's love is the expression of God's holiness.

### **God Who Is Father**

As holiness is the key attribute, Father is the key title for God. Although "Holy Father" was the new revelation of the cross, Forsyth states that people often think too lowly of God as Father or not at all. Instead, it should be the "sum and marrow of all Christian divinity". Its soul is "forgiveness by holiness".<sup>85</sup> Humanity cannot possibly give too much meaning to the name Holy Father. "It is the very nature and totality of Godhead, and the source of man's redemption."<sup>86</sup> Of those who disregard it, he includes those who might call God Father but do not "experience sonship" and miss the genuine kingdom experience of "fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ".<sup>87</sup> The initial step is to believe in Jesus Christ and then to obey his commandment to love, which means to live in the experience of this love and not simply to "do the works which are inspired and suggested by those who have loved."<sup>88</sup> In other words, as with morality, love must emerge from and be defined by a personal relationship with the Holy Father and not an adherence to an external example or law.

While it is important to understand the Holy Father in relation to humanity, he is first and foremost the eternal Father of the Son<sup>89</sup> and it is only through the Son that humanity can

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<sup>84</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *This Life and the Next: The Effect on This Life of Faith in Another*, (1918; reprint, London: Independent Press, 1948), 29.

<sup>85</sup> *Holy Father*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> *Authority*, 259.



experience sonship.<sup>90</sup> “We have a divine love of humanity only in the eternal Son, only if we are loved in the Father’s holy love of the Son.”<sup>91</sup> As will be discussed later, this is essential to Forsyth’s understanding of the atonement. With the Father-Son relationship as primary, the resulting theology would necessarily be theo-centric, even Trinitarian, and not the anthropocentric theology that was damaging the church. In addition, the cross would be fixed at the center of the revelation because only through the atoning work of Christ could humanity establish a Father-child relationship with God. One cannot go straight to love as the liberal focus on the brotherhood of man held. One must go first to the cross.

A low view of the Father, which sees only love and not grace, would also be avoided. The Fatherhood of God expresses a grace that moves him to atone even for his enemies’ sin. People reduce fatherhood to “treat it simply as boundless, patient, waiting, willing love”. God could not simply forgive, which love might make possible. “Account must be had, somewhere and by somebody, of that holiness of God which is the dignity of fatherhood and soul of manhood.”<sup>92</sup> Yet even here Forsyth does not want to see holiness exclusively. “The enforcement of God’s holiness by judgment is as essential to a *universal and eternal* Fatherhood as is the outflow of His love.”<sup>93</sup>

Retaining the scriptural terminology of holy and Father, Forsyth establishes his fundamental understanding of God and holds together holiness and love, not in opposition to each other. It is at the cross that it was most evident that the Father’s holy love was met perfectly in the responding holy love of the Son and poured out toward humanity. Creation was for fellowship; salvation was for reconciliation. God as Father does love like a father, desiring a

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<sup>90</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church: Sermons and Addresses*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), 209.

<sup>91</sup> P. T. Forsyth, “Faith, Metaphysic, and Incarnation”, (*Methodist Review* 97 [September 1915]: 696-719), 706.

<sup>92</sup> *Holy Father*, 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

relationship with humanity and standing ready to forgive those who have sinned. God as holy knows that sin is a rejection of his holiness and must judge it. God as Holy Father judges the sin, sets an appropriate punishment, and accepts it himself. The relationship between God and humanity then is not just any relationship that humanity might want to have with God but a particular one founded on the holy love of God revealed through the holy act of Jesus Christ.

By understanding God as Holy Father, Forsyth affirms simultaneously the transcendence and relationality of God. Holiness, which sets God apart, is expressed in love, which reaches out and draws in. “Father” for Forsyth as it was for Athanasius, means there is a Son, who is eternal just as the Father is eternal. This points toward the mediatorial role of the Son and the connection between the holiness of the Father and the atoning work of the Son.

## **SIN AND JUDGMENT**

### **Sin as an Offense to Holiness**

The proper creaturely response to the holy love of the Holy Father is obedience, but instead humanity disobeyed God and thus rejected his holiness. In *Justification of God*, Forsyth writes about the theodicy this way: “Sin is the death of God. Die sin must or God.”<sup>94</sup> Forsyth follows this statement with another in which he calls the cross “the eternal holiness in conflict for its life.”<sup>95</sup> Forsyth admits to hyperbole in these images of dueling dualism. Sin cannot kill God in an ontological or existential sense, but sin can “kill” by costing God his “bliss” and causing him to be lost to the world forever.<sup>96</sup> It can prevent the realization of the kingdom of holy love. “God there [on the cross] must ‘save His word,’ which is His Kingdom, which is His Godhead; else the

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<sup>94</sup> *Justification*, 147.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-149.

realm of Satan takes its place in control of the world.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, holy God must deal with sin in a manner consistent with his holiness that is self revelation that transforms creation and establishes his reign. If the alternative were possible, and in Forsyth’s mind it is not, God would cease to be God at least in the consciousness of his creation. Evil is not a surface problem, but embedded deep in human nature, and to reduce sin to ignorance or mistakes in judgment reduces Christ. “Not to know sin is not to know Christ.”<sup>98</sup> Only by seeing sin for what it is, humanity’s rebellion against the holy Sovereign, can one understand why the death of the Son of God was required.

The cross is the self-justification of God to the world rather than merely the world’s redemption.<sup>99</sup> God declares on the cross that he is indeed all he has revealed himself to be and will do all that he has set out to do – namely, establish his kingdom of true fellowship with humanity as an expression of holy love. Sin is alien and intolerable to the self-determination of God, because it is humanity asserting its own will in disobedience and rebellion against God. But when sin sought to destroy God by limiting his rule, God responded in loving holiness by limiting himself in the Incarnation and giving himself to the condition, not nature, of sin in his death on the cross. By identifying with sin and death, Christ on the cross abolished both. They are not independent enemy forces but under the control of the Sovereign God.<sup>100</sup> Death became not merely the end of existential misery but a gift and a promise first received as such by Christ, who received death on a cross as a gift of God in an honorable act of obedience to satisfy the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>98</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 214.

<sup>99</sup> *Justification*, 149.

<sup>100</sup> Writing at the time of World War I, Forsyth made this point by saying that even during war God is still on his throne and holds evil “in the hollow of His hands” and that even if Britain lost the war, people should still believe in God. (Ibid., 150-151)

holy judgment of a holy law.<sup>101</sup> Evil had but one chance to win – to refuse to kill Christ and let him continue to live as a good man.<sup>102</sup>

It should be noted that when Forsyth writes of sin, he is writing most often about world or racial sin, as he called it. To say that Christ died for “my” sins is erroneous to Forsyth unless individual sin is seen as part of what Christ truly died for – sin as a world principle. As is typical for Forsyth, he attempts to hold together two important ideas – sins of an individual and the sin of the human race. He does not overemphasize individual sin nor does he ignore it as he accused others of doing. In fact, the more one sees social sin the more one should see one’s culpability.

The more I lament and amend social wrongs the more I must realise before God the responsibility for them of me and mine. ... If it is man that is wronged it is man that has wronged him, it is man that has sinned, man that is condemned. You cannot split up the race. You insist, indeed, on its solidarity.<sup>103</sup>

The significance of Forsyth’s views lies in sin being, through disobedience, a rejection of God’s holiness and an offense against his moral order for the universe.<sup>104</sup> As such, it could not merely be forgiven, which shows at once the inadequacy of love and the fundamental significance of holiness. If the rejection of God’s love without any notions of holiness had been humanity’s sin, forgiveness and a second chance, coupled with the perfect example of Christ to follow with the help of the Spirit, would have been sufficient and God could have continued unchanged. The rejection of his love, in fact, would have been just another opportunity to demonstrate the greatness of his love. However, if the rejection is of God’s holy love, as Forsyth believes, forgiveness alone means that God has disregarded what is most fundamental to his nature and is no longer worthy of trust. It would mean that he had abandoned the self-revelatory

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<sup>101</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace*, (1901; reprint, in *God the Holy Father*, London: Independent Press, 1957), 63.

<sup>102</sup> *Justification*, 223.

<sup>103</sup> *Cruciality*, 36-37.

<sup>104</sup> Hart, “Morality”, 27.

nature of holiness to go out and make all holy as he is holy. This rejection as a rejection of the moral order also has implications for the continuance of humanity's existence. The rejection of holiness demands a judgment that must be met for God's sake and for humanity's sake.

### **The Necessity of Judgment as Past, Present, and Future**

For Forsyth, judgment is a punctiliar act and an “unfolding” process.<sup>105</sup> The judgment of God was made with finality on the cross and the judgment was grace with regards to humanity as Jesus Christ accepted the consequences of the judgment in his atoning death.<sup>106</sup> “Perfect grace was and is final judgment”, Forsyth writes.<sup>107</sup> Using a provocative image, Forsyth holds together divine love and judgment by writing, “Christ bore the love of God to men, but not without its element of wrath — the saving wrath of the Lamb.”<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, Forsyth employs a negative, progressive understanding in which judgment is not grace but an ongoing process at times punctuated by events such as war or natural disaster, a progress by crisis, which he sees as the modern variant of “salvation by judgment”.<sup>109</sup> This judgment process will end in a final judgment, which means it carries an ethical responsibility, but Christ has already provided the final standard — grace, which because it came through an act of atonement has within its nature a moral element.<sup>110</sup> As Hart points out, the effect of Christ's death in humanity, for Forsyth, gives Christ's death its final value.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Justification*, 182.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-171.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-180. Forsyth did not believe that all negative events were judgment.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-180. Forsyth knew the folly of believing only in a remote, final judgment. Such belief removed the ethical dimension from faith. He believed the Enlightenment regained the ethics but virtually eliminated the final judgment, equating Christ's return with history and losing any sense of judgment including hell of any sort. (*Ibid.*, 195)

<sup>111</sup> Hart, “Morality”, 34.

The past, present, and future views of judgment are important for Forsyth. The historical judgment of the cross demonstrates the seriousness and scope of the offense as well as the motivation for and thoroughness of the divine solution. This understanding alone, however, could easily lead to equating human evolution, societal or otherwise, with an emerging kingdom of God and in so doing downplay or eliminate the ongoing significance of the cross. Such a theology had little to say against the reality of the evil of Forsyth's day and even less so in the century to follow. The present judgment prevented the over-identification of the kingdom of God with human history as well as held onto the continuing effects of righteousness, sin, and Satan, which are often casualties of a theology that focuses solely on love or the idea of a human family headed by a heavenly Father.<sup>112</sup> It kept the ethical dimension of faith at the fore. A judgment far in the future, or in the past for that matter, allowed "the vigorous and scientific sinner" to keep sinning.<sup>113</sup> The cross had ended condemnation, but divine chastisement can and did occur at times making grace appear negative.<sup>114</sup> Because the future judgment was grace, it provided eschatological hope for all humanity and provided a basis for faith in a moral order, which Forsyth associated with God's holiness.<sup>115</sup>

Forsyth wrote about judgment during World War I, which made it impossible for him to place a humanistic evolutionary construct on Christendom at war with itself. This was not just evil. It was an evil coming from "Christian" nation fighting "Christian" nation. And even if the war had not occurred, God already had more than enough sin in Europe to judge.<sup>116</sup> Sin was indeed destroyed by the cross, but the full realization of the judgment of grace is not yet. It is not

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<sup>112</sup> *Justification*, 176.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-197.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-194.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 222. Forsyth's list of European sins included "...negligence of God and His righteousness ... materialist civilisations, poor pieties, and shallow politics, and gorgeous getting on ... ."

a “ripening” of the kingdom but the ongoing dilemma of being for or against God. In a sense, each generation confronts this dilemma anew but not alone, and if not for the grace of God, all humanity would reject the cross and God.<sup>117</sup> “Love is not simply the great propelling and enriching principle; it is the great discriminating, consuming, selective, reconstitutive principle. Its holiness is the principle of sifting, and creative and redemptive judgment.”<sup>118</sup> This judgment process by God can be extreme, but the alternative is to believe that God does not actively judge public affairs, which for Forsyth was unacceptable given what God had already done in Christ.<sup>119</sup> “But if God spared not His own Son, He will spare no historic convulsion needful for His kingdom.”<sup>120</sup> In fact, Forsyth believed that given the state of Europe, people should question God if World War I had not broken out.<sup>121</sup>

Life is a problem for the world and for God.<sup>122</sup> It is not a logic puzzle but a tragic battle in which evil and death threaten to overwhelm life. But it is a problem that God has solved in the cross whereby he conquered evil and death, which now in fact work toward a full realization of his kingdom, and presented this conquest as a gift to the world. Evil in the world is not a sign of God’s incapacity or unwillingness to respond. Rather, evil is revealing God’s righteousness through the judgment process.<sup>123</sup> From the cross, Forsyth points out, defeat might very well be victory and misfortune is not necessarily judgment. “We are faced with the gigantic and ironic

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<sup>117</sup> Hart, “Morality”, 24.

<sup>118</sup> *Justification*, 187; cf. 183. Forsyth rejects the Hegelian “moving idea” of making divine judgment a rational process rather than a historic act of a personal God. (Ibid., 201-202) He agrees much more with Nietzsche who “saw life as a vast depth, as a throbbing reality, a tragic tangle, a debacle of the soul .... Nietzsche felt as millions feel, that life culminated in its tragic experiences, and that whatever solved the tragedy of life solved all life”. (Ibid., 209-210).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 205.

paradox of the Cross, which crushes the best to raise both them and the world.”<sup>124</sup> Forsyth admits that the times in which he is writing make any sense of final victory in the cross seem absurd. But that is the role of faith – to believe in things yet unseen. He acknowledges that supernatural courage is required to believe in the love and grace of God during a world war.<sup>125</sup>

The proper human response to what God has done is not thinking out a solution, but in faith living out the solution that has already been provided.<sup>126</sup> Here again the experience of faith plays a significant role in Forsyth’s theology. Thought has a function to open new, larger questions, but it cannot fulfill the role of a living faith that provides the solution to all questions thought might create. Faith must also trust solutions that are beyond or outside thought, resisting the desire to take God’s place and write the conclusion to the drama of life.<sup>127</sup> Forsyth does not support a biblicistic use of the Bible as “a sketchbook of the past” or “a picturebook of the eschaton”, but he does not want Christianity to lose the faith that in the cross God’s kingdom was established and is being realized in history.<sup>128</sup> This should not be limited to world evangelism and personal piety. Although the church will exhibit the characteristics of the redeemed and call the rest of the world to the gospel, the judgment of grace is for all humanity. The working out of the judgment process will eventually end in all humanity, the living and the dead, reconciled to God through the cross of Jesus Christ, because in the cross it has already occurred.<sup>129</sup>

As with the rest of his theology, Forsyth’s views on judgment express the holy love of God, who judges humanity for its sin but in his grace accepts the judgment himself. The response is an acceptance of this gift that establishes fellowship with God and from this reconciled

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 220.



relationship of love produces obedience to the moral order of God. Obedient love from humanity that manifests itself in action is the only acceptable response to the holy love of God that manifests itself in action. This is why judgment is not just a one-time event in history but an ongoing process and why each generation faces the choice for itself, one that without the grace of God it will reject, but because of this grace it will eventually accept.

Forsyth's integrative theology is seen in what has been discussed to this point. God above and before all else is holy, which necessarily reveals itself as love and therefore is best thought of as holy love. As God is revealed, his holy love necessarily seeks to transform all of creation to his holy kingdom. Sin is disobedience and a rejection of this holy love and God's rule. As such, a holy God could not simply forgive without denying his holiness and thwarting his purpose of establishing his holy kingdom through his self revelation. An obedience of love that confessed the holiness of God was required. Judgment for humanity's sin had to be made by God, and it was. But the judgment was grace in the form of God accepting the consequences of the judgment himself. This judgment has a historic and eschatological finality, but it also has a current ongoing reality as humanity must accept in faith the gift of grace. The next question is a Christological one: How did God accept the judgment?

### **JESUS CHRIST, THE OBEDIENT SON**

In Jesus Christ, Forsyth brings together his understanding of God's holiness, revelation, and judgment. Christ is the full revelation of God's holiness and takes upon himself God's judgment on humanity by obediently accepting the judgment and thereby confessing God's holiness. To understand Forsyth's Christology and view of the atonement, one must first understand his Trinitarian views, in particular the relationship of the Father to the Son. This

might seem unnecessary because Forsyth did not consider metaphysics of first-level importance to Christology or Christian theology. In fact, he believed that metaphysics often obscured rather than clarified. But unlike Ritschl, who likely influenced Forsyth's views, he does not reject metaphysics but instead sees the need to emphasize what God in Christ as forgiver, redeemer, creator, and judge has done on behalf of humanity. "His relation to the God of thought is something we can wait for; it is a question of the metaphysic, or the theosophy, of Christian faith and ethic. Personal faith may overleap the centuries and go straight to the Bible Christ."<sup>130</sup> What Forsyth does see is the significance of equality, authority, and obedience in the Godhead, each of which is essential to the atonement.

Ironically, Forsyth has been criticized for focusing on the divinity of Christ almost to the exclusion of any understanding of Christ's humanity. The criticism is valid to a certain extent, but so is Forsyth's focus. Forsyth was correcting what he saw as a serious imbalance in theology in favor of the teachings and example of Jesus to the exclusion of his divinity thus reducing the significance of the atonement. He never dismisses the significance of Christ's humanity but attempts to place it in the context of the holy love of God. Though he does call Trinitarian theology second level, his view of the atonement and, in fact, his entire theology depends on a Trinitarian view of God. Because of difficulty in understanding Forsyth's position on metaphysics, one must begin there before proceeding to his Trinitarian thought and then his Christology.

### **Over-emphasis on Metaphysics a Danger to Christianity**

Forsyth's criticism of Chalcedon provides a look at his reasons for downplaying metaphysics. His disagreement with Chalcedon is not based so much on the content, but its form

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<sup>130</sup> *Cruciality*, 28

and how the church had used the doctrine.<sup>131</sup> Metaphysical explanations too often obscure the gospel, decentralize the cross, and lead to serious problems such as the “Christian” German state of his time.<sup>132</sup> Without the centrality of the cross, God’s love and judgment are decontextualized and Christianity becomes rational morality or sentimentality.

But to begin with either the doctrine of the Trinity or the Incarnation, and descend to an atoning Redemption (as Catholicism did, both in its history and its principle) is to take the note of the Gospel out of the Church, and to depreciate a Christianity of personal experience for one of formal status, in which the man is ranged rather than changed.<sup>133</sup>

The form of Chalcedon is too intellectual for general faith, which means salvation for most people, who were incapable of understanding the doctrine, is not based on faith in Christ, but faith in the authority of the church. They accept it because the church has said it is true and they believe in the church. The faith that results is one that is more propositional than experiential or ethical.<sup>134</sup> By giving the incarnation priority over the cross, Chalcedon inverts the necessary sequence within salvation.<sup>135</sup> Acceptance of doctrine that might or might not be understood is given priority over the experience of salvation.<sup>136</sup> Giving priority to the incarnation and relegating the atonement to part of the process result in semi-Pelagianism in which humanity has power with regards to its redemption.<sup>137</sup> As with Chalcedon, the church had also misused the Athanasian Creed whose metaphysic represented “an element essential to Christian faith”.<sup>138</sup> The problem was not that the creed included a metaphysic but that the church treated the metaphysic therein as final and condemned anyone who would develop it further.

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<sup>131</sup> Forsyth does call Chalcedon “the logical perversion of Christian faith” and “orthodox rationalism”, but the perversion results more from the inversion of the Incarnation over the cross and the rationalism is at least considered orthodox. (*Justification*, 91)

<sup>132</sup> “Chalcedonism is a Christianity based on culture, not to say ruled by it; and Germany, both by its Byzantinism and its militarism, has shown where that ends.” (Ibid., 93)

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 89

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 89

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>138</sup> Metaphysic, 701.

The priority should not be on an ontological metaphysics, but metaphysics of action, an ethical metaphysics. The focus should be on what God was doing in Christ, not on how he was present. Redemption is the basis for the incarnation, because the gospel is directed at the conscience and experience, not intellect in the sense of knowledge acquisition and reasoning. However, the cross and the radical ethic demanded by it had moved, in Forsyth's view, from the center of Christianity to simply a point along the way.

The consequences were devastating to the church – a faith based on sacramentalism, propositionalism, formalism, systematics, social institutions, and triumphalism.<sup>139</sup> Chalcedon resulted in faith that if it has an ethic, it is not one flowing from the cross.<sup>140</sup> Chalcedon is the “antithesis of the true evangelical note”<sup>141</sup> and what is lost is any true sense of sin, forgiveness, regeneration, and reconciliation. It is only natural for the world to reject the authority of a church with such a theology.

Such views of theology as postpone experience to belief, practice to creed, conscience to assent, or regeneration to impression, in the non-moral way I have named, are among the chief reasons why the Church has such a weak moral impact on the world, and why its theological foundations seem irrelevant to righteousness and impotent for crisis in history and society.<sup>142</sup>

Chalcedon places faith in human understanding and expression rather than in God and his continuing work in the world and in the individual believer. Forsyth is not saying one must choose between intellectual understanding and experience, but he is saying that they must be kept in proper perspective or true faith will be lost. The emphasis should not be on how or why

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<sup>139</sup> *Justification*, 92-93.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, 94.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

God chose the cross, but what the cross accomplished.<sup>143</sup> An experience of the cross must precede an understanding of how God did what he did.

These rather harsh words are understandable given the plight of the world at the time that he wrote them. In attempting to better understand God, Christians had become distracted from what was most important regarding what God had done for the world and what their responsive actions should be. The church had made an idol of the doctrine, relating to it rather than to the One it described. To regain proper focus, Christians needed to take their eyes off the metaphysics and look to the “metaphysics of action” that took place on the cross. Without denying a substance ontology, Forsyth moves away from it to focus on how the Persons relate to one another. He summarizes the point this way,

The ontological deity of Christ is a necessary condition of the new creation, but my belief in any formula of that deity is not a necessary condition of my being created anew; it is only an inevitable corollary or expression thereof.<sup>144</sup>

By making metaphysics secondary, Forsyth does not see salvation as being primarily effected in the joining of the divine and human natures in the Incarnation. Rather, from his focus on the cross, he is able to make the will, and therefore obedience, as primary to salvation.

### **Metaphysics a Necessity for Christianity**

Though the church had erred in how it had used metaphysics, this did not mean that doctrine based on metaphysics was in error. Forsyth believed that if metaphysics were rejected “the sense of a real and objective God fails”<sup>145</sup> and thus Christianity fails. While the misuse of metaphysics had been problematic, the rejection of metaphysics had been even more so. Without metaphysics, God as a being beyond humanity either could not be known (agnosticism) or did

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>144</sup> Metaphysic, 718.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 697.

not exist (atheism), both of which led to individualism whether religious or irreligious. Some believed religious individualism to be the principle of the Reformation, but Forsyth sees it as the principle of the Enlightenment with the Reformation principle being something quite different.

“It is personal faith, which has submission to authority in its very being, since it owes itself and everything to absolute grace ... .”<sup>146</sup> Individualism gave authority to human reason,

interpretation, or experience relegating God to at best secondary status and in some cases dismissing him altogether. Personal faith necessitated belief in a personal God who should receive complete obedience. For a personal faith in a personal God, metaphysics are essential.

For the individual Christian metaphysics might be of little concern, but “it is a prime necessity for the collective ... faith which makes a church what it is.”<sup>147</sup> Christian faith must move to a deeper understanding of the Christ who is absolutely and eternally trusted because God is in him.

And how can we really have God in him without some suggestion of ontological continuity, however defined? A voluntarist union of will and will is not enough, and we press for something that makes a divergence between them impossible. We have God in Christ, not simply through him. And in Christ’s essential unity with God we have the only condition of that absolute trust in him which is true Christian faith ... .<sup>148</sup>

Metaphysics then is a practical necessity, a necessity forced upon the church from its faith experience with Christ. “The Christ who had become Lord to the first Christian age, and who would be Lord to all ages when history was wound up in the Kingdom, must be the Lord before all ages and before the foundation of the world.”<sup>149</sup> This Christ was somehow God, and the church sought to express the deity of the one who had come to redeem and transform the world.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 701.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 703.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 704.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 706.

## The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit is essential to Christianity, which Forsyth expresses throughout his works.<sup>150</sup> God as Trinity ensures his eternal independence, omnipotence, perfection, and contentment. He was not a solitary being who needed to create so that he might have a friend, but for all eternity has existed as having within himself “the ground and object of his outgoing love”.<sup>151</sup> The doctrine, however, must be founded on the redemption and not on philosophy or metaphysics, because the Trinity and redemption are integral to each other, a position that Forsyth credits to the genius of Athanasius.<sup>152</sup> Although it is a derivative doctrine, it is foundational truth. Only a God who is Trinity could redeem, but only through the redemption of Christ could the church know God as Trinity. In *Justification of God*, Forsyth writes: “To overcome the world and master life takes all the deep resources of Eternal God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. ‘When the Gospel is duly preached it is the Trinity that preaches.’”<sup>153</sup> This is why with ambivalence, as McCurdy notes, Forsyth can both disparage Athanasius’ Trinitarian thought as speculative and laud it as “the truest doctrine of the Godhead the world has ever seen.”<sup>154</sup> The reason, as with Chalcedon, is not the content so much as how the church has misused the doctrine. Nevertheless, Forsyth believes the Trinity is the only logical conclusion that the church could arrive at based on its experience of what Christ had accomplished and the church had experienced.

None but a Christ essentially divine could do what the Church beyond all other knowledge knows the cross to have done for its soul. The divinity of Christ is what the Church was driven upon to explain the effect on it of the cross. Nothing less could

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<sup>150</sup> McCurdy (223) cites *Justification*, 87; *Faith*, 263; *Authority*, 231; *Person and Place*, 349.

<sup>151</sup> *Person and Place*, 347.

<sup>152</sup> *Moral Guide*, 19.

<sup>153</sup> *Justification*, 208.

<sup>154</sup> McCurdy, 224. He is citing Forsyth from *Theology in the Church and State*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 36, and “Theosophy and Theology,” *Independent*, Nov. 6, 1891, 798.

explain the new creation, which is so much deeper than any impression on us, and calls for an author so much more than prophetic, hortatory, or impressionist in soul.<sup>155</sup>

Quite naturally, then, Forsyth could appreciate that the metaphysics of the Trinity was the church's expression of the faith experience.<sup>156</sup> Forsyth believed the error was pushing forward the conclusion as essential dogma that had to be accepted, even if not understood, prior to becoming a Christian rather than making the experience of redemption and reconciliation primary. This inversion reduces the requisite personal, life-changing experience to formalism and propositionalism.<sup>157</sup> He preached an ethical Christianity, but not one that was mere adherence to a set of rules or principles. Instead, Forsyth believed that the experience of reconciliation that led to the doctrine of the Trinity would keep the church returning to the same conclusion and give the doctrine continued vitality that it had lost. In the larger scheme, only the Trinity could have accomplished the reconciliation of the world. But from the perspective of the world, the reconciliation through the atonement must be the focus. Trinitarian theology, not the Trinity itself, is secondary to the experience of faith only in terms of the order of encounter that humanity has with God.<sup>158</sup> The Trinity is indeed who God is and Trinitarian theology is essential to Christian doctrine, but it is secondary with regards to the order of knowledge that is most efficacious for a person to become a Christian.

Forsyth's approach then is not to try to solve the divine mystery of the Three and One, which had been the error of theologians throughout church history who either began with the oneness or threeness of God and sought to explain how this could be. Forsyth believes that the inner relation of the Father and the Son cannot be known fully; only what has been revealed can

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<sup>155</sup> *Cruciality*, 30. See also, 162. See also "God died for us in a sense which only a Trinitarian doctrine can convey." (McCurdy, 225 quoting "Our Experience of a Triune God", *Cambridge Christian Life* 1 [June 1914] : 244)

<sup>156</sup> *Metaphysic*, 707.

<sup>157</sup> *Justification*, 89-90. He makes a similar point in *Cruciality*, 155.

<sup>158</sup> This was never clearer to him than during World War I. (*Justification*, 14) See also *Metaphysic*, 707.



be known.<sup>159</sup> Thus, he begins with neither the oneness nor the threeness, instead choosing to begin at the cross thereby avoiding the pitfalls of modalism, monism, tritheism, or ontological subordinationism. He begins with the revelation of God seen most fully in Christ and his cross and from that point moving to an understanding of the only conception of God that could have accomplished the work done there. Although Forsyth holds to an orthodox view of the Trinity, he wants to always keep at the fore the fact that the Trinity as revealed doctrine is derivative from the cross. The holiness of the cross points to the relationship between the Father and the Son. Holiness must answer holiness, Forsyth contends, and only God is holy. “The Father who *spoke* by his prophets must *come* to save in the Son and must *occupy* in the Spirit. He offers, gives, Himself in the Son and conveys Himself in the Spirit”.<sup>160</sup> A strict monotheism cannot conceive of a God who can truly become human yet remain holy God and who can commune with and in humanity yet still remain other.

God in Christ asserts Himself in his absolute freedom (“I, even I, am he”); He limits Himself for His creature’s freedom (“that blotteth out thy transgressions”); and bestows Himself to make that freedom communion (“For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee”). It is all one holy love and grace, in this Eternal threefold action, both within God and upon man. Only on this Trinitarian conception of God can we think of such a salvation as ours.<sup>161</sup>

This is self revelation in the truest sense of the word. God reveals himself not by merely sending a message or a messenger, but by coming himself and through his actions revealing who he is and establishing his kingdom. There is no atonement if there is no Trinity. The Father is the source of all, the Son is the one who self limits so that he might become the sacrifice, and the Spirit is the “eternal bond of communion” between the Father and Son, among those in the

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<sup>159</sup> *Person and Place*, 40-41.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

church, and between humanity and God.<sup>162</sup> The immanence and transcendence of God are maintained in such a way that God does not cease to be God, yet God is the one who is reconciling humanity to himself. “Our redemption drew upon the whole Godhead. Father and Spirit were not spectators only of the Son’s agony, nor only recipients of his sacrifice. They were involved in it.”<sup>163</sup> The Trinitarian nature of the cross demonstrates the depth of God’s holy love as well as the depth of humanity’s sin and guilt. God himself came and only God himself could accomplish our redemption. It also keeps at the fore the transformational, relational effect of redemption. A divine Person, not a power or exalted creature, had to come to restore the personal relationship and to impart to us the divine life so that we might participate in the divine community.

Forsyth is not concerned with how Father, Son, and Spirit are Three co-equal Persons and one God and speculates little regarding how the Three Persons interrelate.<sup>164</sup> Yet he does understand the significance of the perichoretic intra-Trinitarian relationship. When describing the unity that should exist in the church, Forsyth says it cannot be a bond based on organization but on “the only kind of life that organizes persons as such by the distinctively Christian principle of the interpenetration of persons and their cohesion in a supreme personality—the principle of the Christian Triune God.”<sup>165</sup> Anticipating the social Trinitarian theology that would be emphasized decades after his death, Forsyth believed there needed to be a shift from a substance metaphysics to a “metaphysic of social ethic, of personality, of spirits and their interpenetration ...”<sup>166</sup> The interpenetration does not result because Father, Son, and Spirit are divine. Rather, it is because they are persons and not individuals and as persons they are necessarily in relationship to one

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<sup>162</sup> *Authority*, 259.

<sup>163</sup> *Missions*, 29.

<sup>164</sup> What he does say on the relationship of the Father and Son will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>165</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 184.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

another because that is what it means to be a person. Because perichoresis is based on personhood and not divinity, it is accessible to humanity. If an individual human is a person, he or she will share in the perichoretic kingdom life of holy love.

For it is such persons only, and not mere individuals that can interpenetrate. Each has wealth to give, and room to receive the rest. We grow by such mutual interpenetration. Hearts swell into each other. We assimilate each other.<sup>167</sup>

Forsyth's views echo the high priestly prayer of John 17 when Jesus prays "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us ... ." (v. 21) The followers of Christ are invited to share in the divine community experienced among other believers and with the Trinity. For believers, this is clearly not merely an association with one another but an intimate perichoretic relationship that maintains the uniqueness of each person yet is marked by such an identification with one another that the group itself is an organism and has a corporate personality. Trinitarian unity, however, is not just for the church but all society and it is a moral unity, a unity of persons, not a metaphysical one that is most important. And it is a moral unity whose foundation is in the atonement. "That is to say in the Holy Cross we have the moral principle of the universe which the Church has to administer and adjust to the successive phases of human society."<sup>168</sup>

### **The role of the Spirit**

Everything returns to the cross as it always does with Forsyth. The church can establish the kingdom of God in the world but only by beginning with the revelation of God in the cross of Jesus Christ and through that experience be transformed into persons capable of experiencing Trinitarian community. It is the primary role of the Holy Spirit to indwell and transform the

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<sup>167</sup> *This Life*, 66.

<sup>168</sup> *Moral Guide*, 19.

world into the kingdom. Some of the literature criticizes Forsyth's pneumatology though some of the criticism is unfair given Forsyth's need-based approach to theology. The need of the day was not an emphasis on the Spirit, which through Hegelianism, Protestant liberalism, and spiritualism was causing problems in the church. The need was to reemphasize the cross and the holy love of God and to connect the role of the Spirit to them.

It is this connection that typifies Forsyth's pneumatology. The Spirit cannot be separated from the Word nor can he be separated from what Christ has done on the cross. "Only the Lord the Spirit, by the Word of the Gospel, makes the person of Christ so near as to be ever-present revelation and ever-creative redemption by God."<sup>169</sup> From age to age and person to person, the Spirit reveals Christ by Christ confronting humanity as at Pentecost or on the Damascus Road. This is not human evolution – this is the power of the cross brought home by the Spirit to convict and redeem. The Spirit brings humanity to the cross so that God can be seen properly and believers are empowered to live accordingly.<sup>170</sup> The Spirit holds together the divine revelation in a way exactly opposite of what Hegel proposed. "One of the greatest actions of the Spirit in modern thought is to preserve Christ's influence from being detached from His act and turned into a moral process."<sup>171</sup> It is this ongoing interpretive role that is as essential to the atonement as is the sending of the Father and the sacrifice of the Son. True to the Reformed influences in his thought, Forsyth can see no positive role for humanity in redemption – humanity cannot contribute to its own salvation – a fundamental belief he will return to in discussing the relationship of the Father to the Son.

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<sup>169</sup> *Authority*, 130. See also *Positive Preaching*, 14.

<sup>170</sup> *Missions*, 75.

<sup>171</sup> *Positive Preaching*, 15.

The final moral conviction cannot be brought about by conscience alone, but by God's Spirit in the conscience. There is not repentance so precious as the repentance of the good and holy.<sup>172</sup>

As will be discussed in greater detail later, the issue is not merely forgiveness. Rather it is the building of the kingdom by transforming humanity into the new creation that has a perfected relationship with God. The indwelling Spirit provides to the church not only the true interpretation of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but also the certainty of this truth. But again, the Spirit cannot be separated from the Word. They work together.<sup>173</sup> Here, Forsyth uses perichoresis to describe this cooperative effort agreeing with Martin Luther that Word and Spirit should be in "organic unity of constant mutual immanence and interaction."<sup>174</sup>

The diversity of opinion on Forsyth's pneumatology reveals the difficulty of reading his unsystematic approach to theology. Opinions range from seeing an over-reaction to immanence<sup>175</sup> to an embracing of Hegelianism resulting in panentheism.<sup>176</sup> Sykes and Russell criticize Forsyth's pneumatology for not having sufficient explanation of the work of the Spirit in the world.<sup>177</sup> McCurdy, who notes that no work has ever examined Forsyth's pneumatology in depth, finds Forsyth understanding the role of Holy Spirit as being directly related to the church and the individual believer. The Spirit assists the church in numerous ways including communicating the historical reality of the cross anew to each generation to prevent Christ's work from being understood simply as a moral process.<sup>178</sup> But this is where Forsyth holds everything together, though not in as neat a package as some would like. Though the Spirit's primary role is to work directly with the church, it is through the church that the Spirit affects the

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<sup>172</sup> *Missions*, 64.

<sup>173</sup> *Faith*, 12-14.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>175</sup> Stephen W. Sykes, "P T Forsyth on the Church," In *Justice the True and Only Mercy*, 14.

<sup>176</sup> Russell, 233.

<sup>177</sup> Sykes, 13-15; Russell, 234.

<sup>178</sup> McCurdy, 233. Pitt shares a similar view. (92) See also Pitt, 47 for a discussion of Forsyth's emphasis on the Spirit and the church.

world through the proclamation of the gospel and the furtherance of the kingdom. Forsyth's pneumatology and ecclesiology are so interrelated that to speak of the kingdom work of the church is to speak of the work of the Spirit and vice versa.

### **Significance of Forsyth's Trinitarian theology**

Forsyth holds to an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, and though he does not believe that the metaphysical explanation of the Trinity is first-level theology, he knows that it is necessary. Father, Son, and Spirit are Three equal Persons who are one God. He remains largely silent on how this can be, instead choosing to focus on how God revealed this truth to the church through the work of Christ on the cross and the work of Christ and the Spirit in the church following the resurrection. Implied is that Forsyth, too, has had this truth confirmed to him through his life-changing experience with the Gospel and the Spirit. What is sometimes forgotten in the study of Forsyth's theology is the role of experience in revealing or sealing what is true. While one would like to hear this theologian's speculative thoughts on the inner nature of God, it was not what he saw as the most pressing need of his day. It is the project of the Enlightenment to pursue the how in place of the why. Forsyth chooses to focus on the latter. Without denying that metaphysics have their role, he had seen the danger of its misuse, the biggest of which was the loss of the centrality of the cross. But drawing from Athanasius, Forsyth finds the integral link between the cross and the Trinity seeing that only the Trinity could have accomplished the gracious judgment of the cross. Only God can redeem in such a way as not only to save, but also to recreate humanity and establish a kingdom of holy love. From this thought, he develops his Christology and understanding of the atonement that centers on the cross and the relationship of the Father and the Son. In the background is Forsyth's understanding of sin as disobedience to God and the

need for obedience in the atonement to bring reconciliation. In Forsyth's words, "holiness must meet holiness". This clause summarizes the need for at least a binitarian God. The obedience offered must be offered by the divine for holiness to meet holiness. This leads to a high Christology, which will now be discussed.

### **The Deity of Christ**

As stated above, the deity of Jesus Christ was the only true theology that could have emerged from the evangelical experience of the church. This is because Christians did not believe simply that they had been forgiven of sins; they believed they had been recreated and reconciled to God. God's project was the revelation of his glory through the establishment of his kingdom. Through the work of Christ, humanity could share in the divine life because God was not simply on our side, he was dwelling with us and in us.<sup>179</sup> From Athanasius, Forsyth sees that true forgiveness of sin, in which pardon is not only granted, but the slate is wiped clean, could only be accomplished by God. Only God creates and thus only God can recreate. Only God can impart the divine life and provide entrance to the divine community. The very nature of salvation as absolute, eternal, and free must come from one who is absolute, eternal, and free.<sup>180</sup> If God truly loves in a divine way, he will not create another to save the ones he loves. He will love through his action, through his coming.<sup>181</sup> This is why Forsyth affirms "the deity of Christ is at the centre of Christian truth for us because it is the postulate of the redemption which *is* Christianity, ... because it alone makes the classic Christian experience possible for thought."<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> *Person and Place*, 93.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-87.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

In addition, the seriousness of sin as a disobedience to God had to be satisfied with an obedience worthy of God. Only God could accomplish this.

Any lesser understanding of Jesus Christ devalues the atonement, the kingdom, and God himself. It does not give full account of humanity's sin and does not comprehend the holy love of God. Forsyth's view of the atonement, which will be discussed below, shows that if God holiness has been offended only an equal holiness can correct the offense.

### **The Divine Humility of Christ**

With the deity of Christ affirmed, how then did the human and divine natures interrelate in Jesus? Not surprisingly, Forsyth finds the Chalcedonian and Athanasian formulas insufficient, acknowledging the two natures but not working out how they relate. These two formulas were defensive in nature, seeking more to prevent error than to reveal truth. Other theories also fell short because there was an insufficient understanding of metaphysics and personality.<sup>183</sup> As is consistent with Forsyth, he wants to return to the revelation and determine what the cross relates seeing the act and not the metaphysics behind the act as most important. Some might accuse him of avoiding the issue, as he does with the Trinity, and he might very well agree. He avoids the issue of how the two natures coincide, because for him that is not the issue. As with the Trinity, rather than speculate on how Jesus is divine and human, he prefers to ascertain what the incarnation means and what it accomplished.

One of Forsyth's main expositions on the subject is found in his understanding of Philippians 2:6-11. Forsyth does not believe Paul is writing metaphysically, philosophically, or rationally. Paul's kenotic statement is a moral, or ethical, statement that centers on the humility

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 218.



of Christ's life and death.<sup>184</sup> "It was an act of heart and will, of free resolve, of self limitation, self-contradiction as it were, self-divesting, self-humiliation, self-subordination."<sup>185</sup> In the incarnation, Paul is not trying to express the relationship or the creation of the unique two-natured Christ. Rather, the apostle is simply describing "the historic humiliation" of Christ in the incarnation as an example of the humility that Christians should demonstrate in their relationships to one another. The incarnation and humiliation are one "great act of will and obedience".<sup>186</sup> The emphasis is not on the miraculous conjoining of the divine and human natures in Christ, but that the Son was "one of us that was labouring, fighting, trusting, dying, conquering".<sup>187</sup> It is the moral, not the miraculous, that gives the kenosis value.

Forsyth rejected any notion of the kenosis meaning that Christ set aside his divinity, concealed it, or retracted it in the sense of losing all self-consciousness of it.<sup>188</sup> Forsyth sought a meaning for kenosis that allowed the Son to retain self-consciousness while renouncing or limiting the infinity of his being. He found it by adding plerosis to kenosis.

The starting place was to stop thinking of natures and how one conditions the other. Rather, Christology should see Jesus Christ as a new mode of being. "The Son, by an act of love's omnipotence, set aside the style of a God, and took the style of a servant, the mental manner of a man, and the mode of moral action that marks human nature."<sup>189</sup> There is a retraction of divine attributes, but not their extinction. The attributes move from actual to potential and will be reactualized throughout the historic life of Christ. "As he grew in personal consciousness he became conscious of himself as the Eternal Son of God, who had dispowered

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<sup>184</sup> *Holy Father*, 38. See also *Cruciality*, 25.

<sup>185</sup> *Holy Father*, 38.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 40. For Forsyth, the virgin birth is not necessary for the atonement. Jesus could have been conceived and born like any other human being. It is his death that is essential. (*Ibid.*, 41).

<sup>188</sup> *Person and Place*, 295.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

himself to be the son of man by a compendious moral act whereby a God conscious of humanity became a man equally conscious of deity.”<sup>190</sup> Forsyth preferred the terms self-reduction or self-retraction to self-emptying. His argument is focused on what the Son experienced or did not experience (which was self-limitation) and not how this was possible. The Son in the person of Jesus Christ experienced life as any human being would, growing in his awareness of who he has eternally been.

He defended the logic of his position in a couple of ways. For one, he found it absurd to think that becoming finite could be beyond the ability of the infinite One. Similarly, Forsyth believed that true omnipotence must be able to self-limit. This makes sense only in the context of a God who is Trinity, otherwise God would be acting contrary to his nature. If the Son self limits as an expression of his omnipotence, God is not even temporarily limited and thus remains omnipotent. In fact, the kenosis is an expression of God’s omnipotence whereby the Son will be recognized as Lord. “Among the infinite powers of the Omnipotent must be the power to limit Himself, and among His glories the grace to bend and die.”<sup>191</sup> Further, self-limitation that resulted in the incarnation is divine, otherwise God would be “locked out”<sup>192</sup> of his creation and certainly not omnipotent.<sup>193</sup> Self-limitation also demonstrates that God is personal and free, not an amorphous force or impersonal power.

...the infinite freedom and power of God is not a thing of immunities and abstractions, withdrawn from the world of nature and man. It is the power to live and move, with harmonious ease and completed being, in and through all the rich contents of nature, soul, and will, and finally to subdue them all to His own nature and purpose.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>191</sup> *Holy Father*, 33.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 35.

If one rejects the incarnation as being possible, one must reject the possibility of God in the classical theistic view because omnipotence must possess the ability to self-limit.<sup>195</sup> Secondly, Forsyth divine attributes are in reality functions of attributes that God uses “in working his will of love”.<sup>196</sup> Even creation in which God granted freedom to humanity, he limited his own freedom.<sup>197</sup> With regards to omniscience, Forsyth summarized his position this way:

By his own will God in Christ reduced his intelligence from being actual to being potential, within the kingdom of power or nature; while from that potentiality, as Christ grew in grace, it developed and regained actual omniscience by living it back, by the moral way of the kingdom of Grace, till he left the world behind, to be determined as the Son of God in power.<sup>198</sup>

The kenosis as self-retraction is not a negation of Christ’s nature, but the opposite – an assertion of his nature as love and his free will. “He never willed anything so mightily and freely as the subjection, the renunciation of self-will to the holy requirement of God.”<sup>199</sup> Forsyth called it “incessant obedience”. That is why the main point of Philippians 2 is humility. Christ’s life and death “was an act of heart and will, of free resolve, of self-limitation, self-contraction as it were, self-divesting, self-humiliation, self subordination.”<sup>200</sup>

This understanding of kenosis allows Forsyth to give grounds for a more complete Christology than other kenotic theories that left Christ emptied resulting in asceticism, piety, or a weak ethic. Not content with explaining how the Son could retract divinity to potentiality, Forsyth gave an account of a plerosis in which “we must note the growth, the exaltation, of his objective achievement, culminating in the perfecting at once of his soul and our salvation in the cross, resurrection, and glory.”<sup>201</sup> The potential was re-actualized.

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>196</sup> *Person and Place*, 309.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>200</sup> *Holy Father*, 38.

<sup>201</sup> *Person and Place*, 329-330.

On the whole, Forsyth refrained from metaphysical speculation, but when finally dealing with how the divine and human related in Jesus, he gives what is in some ways a unique twist on the matter but reminiscent of the more dynamic perichoretic view that has been seen especially in Greek Patristic thought.<sup>202</sup> Having set aside natures, Forsyth appeals to “*the union of God and man in Christ as the mutual involution of two personal movements raised to the whole scale of the human soul and the divine.*”<sup>203</sup> The reason is simple. Salvation’s aim is not human deification but personal communion between God and humanity. Nature points to the former, movements to the latter.

Anthropologically, humanity constantly seeks God and God is constantly “passing into” humanity, not as two entities, but as “two movements in mutual interplay, mutual struggle, and reciprocal communion.”<sup>204</sup> The perfect and absolute God creates and produces, and the developing humanity searches, errs, and grows. While perfect, God has eternal movement within his changeless nature, which he gives to humanity.<sup>205</sup> As these movements come together, a whirlpool forms, which Forsyth calls perichoresis “in which the two currents become mutually and crucially involved, forming a centre of perfect rest.”<sup>206</sup> That is what occurs in Christ – this perfect harmony of the two movements. There is no parallel in human experience.<sup>207</sup>

Forsyth says that in Christ there is one nature in two modes of action, but these modes are not impersonal forces but are will. In Christ, there is a perfect union of the divine and human will that is “their reconciliation and not merely their confluence, their mutual living involution and

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<sup>202</sup> The infrequency of footnotes in his works makes it difficult to know if Forsyth was drawing from the Greek patristics.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 337. Forsyth later says this is more than interpenetration, one of the common definitions for perichoresis. Imprecise use of terms is not uncommon for Forsyth. (Ibid., 343.)

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 344.

not simply their inert conjunction.”<sup>208</sup> While Forsyth loses the language of combining natures, he does not lose subjectivity.

In Christ’s life and work, the Son becomes the eternal “divine mobility” he eternally was. The eternal Person lives in corporeal personality, which means human growth occurred.<sup>209</sup> This is the movement of humanity to God. Aware of the criticism of such a view, Forsyth explains that Christ is not growing to who he might be, but growing into who he already was.<sup>210</sup> Although as God Christ had no capacity for sin, he still faced the temptations as a man without knowledge of his sinlessness. The movement of God to humanity is part of God’s *ekstasis* to communicate himself to create and to redeem.

Although Forsyth resorts to a metaphysical explanation, it is plausible and consistent with his overall emphases. By reducing the role of a Chalcedonian metaphysics of substance, Forsyth opened the way to what he called a “metaphysics of action”. He keeps the focus on the acts of a holy God in Christ without losing the sense that there is a transcendent actor who so desires personal communion with his creatures that he would in humility limit himself on their behalf. Forsyth does not eliminate divinity from Jesus, thus allowing God to truly become man. He also gives space for the human growth that allows divinity to genuinely experience human existence, albeit without the possibility of sinning. As we shall see, this is not an important point for Forsyth who locates the atoning significance of Jesus’ life more in the eternal obedience of the Son than in the obedience of the human Jesus, although the two are not separated completely.

When God became man, the process could in no way raise or lower the nature of God, yet the kenosis occurred in some form, according to Philippians. Forsyth explained the kenosis in such a way as to preserve the equality of nature by removing it from the equation so to speak. He

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 337-338.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 342.

also allowed for a humility that was not a new experience to the Godhead but another expression of divinity. Divine humility is fundamental to his understanding of the relationship of the Father and the Son and to the atonement.

### **Obedience in the Atonement**

Forsyth believed that faith and the theological understanding of it begin at the cross. This chapter has been organized in the opposite direction, beginning with Forsyth's emphases on relevant theological matters and now moving to how all of these are informed and held together by Forsyth's view on the atonement.

In typical fashion, Forsyth considers the main atonement theories helpful but defective and when believed exclusively even harmful. He accused Protestantism of making works subsequent to faith rather than maintaining the essential connection between the two seen in Christ's making of a new creation. The Reformers' emphasis on suffering rather than obedience disconnected justification and sanctification, and Anselm's emphasis on God's honor compounded the sin problem. The atonement has three aims: (1) redemption or triumph, in which evil is overcome and Satan defeated; (2) satisfaction or justification, in which God's holiness is satisfied through the work of Christ and rebellious humanity is justified; and (3) regeneration or sanctification, in which the kingdom is established not in place of evil, but in the heart of it thereby destroying it forever.<sup>211</sup> Each era of the church had emphasized one of these to the detriment of the others leading to a deficient understanding of the atonement. Instead the three major historical views must be united by the understanding of Christ's perfect obedience of holy love to his Holy Father. The redemptive view of the early church and the modern view of sanctification are intertwined because God does not simply save humanity from evil, but to

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<sup>211</sup> *Work*, 224-225. See also *Holy Church*, 23-27.

himself. The modern view and the Medieval or Reformation satisfactionary or justification view are intertwined because Christ accomplished restored obedience for humanity. Christ alone had a “holy obedience so perfect as to meet the holiness of God on the scale of our sin ... and ... by the same obedience, has the power to reproduce in man the kind of holiness which alone can please God ... .”<sup>212</sup> This emphasis on the obedience of Christ is not an innovation, traced at least back to Irenaeus, who also saw the obedience of Christ necessary to satisfy the offense of Adam’s disobedience.<sup>213</sup>

Forsyth adopts the language of Anselm’s satisfaction theory, but he draws from his theological understanding to give the model a dramatically different meaning. The holiness of God is what is most foundational to the being of God and what is most important for humanity.<sup>214</sup> Sin is the rejection of God’s holiness, and therefore a holy God cannot simply forgive but must judge. The judgment is, however, not death. To satisfy the Father an equal holiness from the side of humanity is required. The Father is satisfied, not by the death or suffering of Christ, but by the obedience of his Son. A penalty for a crime might satisfy the need for justice, but sin is a debt of holiness that requires a payment of “perfect holiness”, or “loving obedience”.<sup>215</sup> This is why only God himself could pay this debt, but only if he became man without ceasing to be God. Ultimately, the final satisfaction will come when all of humanity is holy, i.e., the kingdom is complete.<sup>216</sup> The holy God can only create that which will be in a final sense holy. Only the realization of this holiness will truly satisfy God. Christ on the cross was re-establishing the moral order that is an expression of God’s holiness.

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<sup>212</sup> *Work*, 203. See also *Authority*, 214.

<sup>213</sup> Irenaeus, *Ag. Heresies* 4, 14, 1; 4, 17, 1-5. Cited in Kelly, 174.

<sup>214</sup> Here Forsyth also moves beyond Athanasius, who saw humanity’s offense against the honor of the Father. (*On the Incarnation* 11.3-7, cited in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. H. S. Bettenson, [Oxford: Oxford University, 1947], 47-48).

<sup>215</sup> *Holy Father*, 11.

<sup>216</sup> Hart, “Morality”, 20.

Forgiveness and reconciliation required more than the offering of a sacrifice. It required a new obedience, but the source of this new obedience was God's holy love. On its own, humanity would face God's judgment as destruction. But God does not leave humanity alone, instead bearing the judgment himself for and in humanity as Christ. Humanity does face the death it deserved in the death of Christ. Judgment fell on him for all humanity. He accepted the judgment to render the obedience and received the punishment. To humanity, this judgment is grace; the judge is humanity's redeemer.<sup>217</sup>

### **Obedience of the Son atones**

Central to Forsyth's understanding of the atonement then is the emphasis on the obedience of Christ to the Father as the significant action in the world's redemption rather than in notions of suffering, sacrifice, or penal satisfaction. "It is not death that atones, but that supreme act and expression of holy, obedient life which does such justice to God's holiness as the Son alone could do; and which is possible only under the conditions of death, and of such death as Christ died."<sup>218</sup> Death is necessary in atonement, but it is not what makes atonement efficacious for humanity's salvation. As stated earlier, the three historic views of the atonement – triumphant, satisfactionary, and regenerative – taken individually are incomplete and must be unified by a correct understanding of the holy obedience of Christ who in holy love acknowledged the judgment of God and accepted it.<sup>219</sup>

Now the object I have in view in this lecture is to press a former point as furnishing this unity—that the active and effective principle in the work of Christ was the perfect obedience of holy love which he offered amidst the conditions of sin, death, and

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<sup>217</sup> *Cruciality*, 53, 132.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>219</sup> *Work of Christ*, 199ff.



judgment. The potent thing was not the suffering but the sanctity, and not the sympathetic confession of our sins so much as the practical confession of God's holiness.<sup>220</sup>

This obedience that culminated in Christ's death on the cross resulted in the "destruction of evil, the satisfaction of God, and the sanctification of men".<sup>221</sup> Forsyth's usage of a relational term like obedience is understandable given his view that the primary purpose of the cross is reconciliation<sup>222</sup> between God and humanity, of which the other purposes are integral but partial understandings. Humanity is saved not just from hell, or evil, but also to heaven, or good. "We are won from sin by an act which at the same time makes us not simply innocent but holy."<sup>223</sup> This sanctification is the complete satisfaction of a holy God, which can only be made from the sinful side by "the sinner's restored obedience, his return to holiness."<sup>224</sup> But this sanctifying act required the holiness of the sinner, and that seemingly oxymoronic phrase "holiness of the sinner" depicts the dilemma that only Christ could solve. God required not death for satisfaction, but holiness, which from humanity's side can only be expressed in perfect obedience.<sup>225</sup> God's purpose for the atonement was reconciliation, because the relationship between God and humanity had been broken by humanity's disobedience. Only perfect obedience could restore the relationship. The focus on obedience also keeps at the fore God's project in establishing a personal, even intimate, relationship with humanity. This kind of relationship cannot be established between the holy and the unholy.

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>222</sup> *Cruciality*, 29.

<sup>223</sup> *Work of Christ*, 202.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 205-206. Hart notes that the full satisfaction of God will occur when the holiness is realized historically in humanity as a complete manifestation of the eschatological kingdom, an event guaranteed by the work of Christ on the cross. (Hart, "Morality", 35)

### Sacrifice as surrender of the will

Forsyth's understanding of the blood of Christ and sacrifice connects God's assumption of the judgment for humanity's sin with the obedience of the Son. Christ could have died in any way, because the shedding of blood was not necessary. The life symbolized by the blood was offered to God in obedience to God's will. The blood as life means "the central will, the self-will, the whole will, in loving oblation."<sup>226</sup> For Israel, "the value of the sacrifice rite lay wholly in the fact of its being God's will, God's appointment, what God ordained as the machinery of His grace for national purposes."<sup>227</sup> At the heart of Christ's sacrifice was his obedience to the will of the Father. Forsyth rejects that the "giver of life" would find pleasure in death<sup>228</sup> or that a tribute could be acceptable for the sacrifice required.<sup>229</sup> Christ's shedding of his blood on the cross was a voluntary, personal, loving, and complete sacrifice of his "holy self to a holy God from sin's side"<sup>230</sup> and only Christ's holiness could answer the Father's holiness.<sup>231</sup> It was a sacrifice of his will. The blood of Christ was "the *exhaustive obedience and surrender* of His total self"<sup>232</sup> given as a necessary response to an actual situation. "It is the absolute active death of self-will *into* the holy will of God; but also *by* that will; the complete, central, vital obedience of the holy to the holy in a necessary act on the Eternal scale."<sup>233</sup> Where Israel had failed in its divine mission, Christ succeeded by giving complete obedience to God. The perfect obedience is a complete identification of the Christ's will with the Father's.

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<sup>226</sup> *Cruciality*, 192.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-179.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 182. This is not an innovation by Forsyth. Gregory of Naziansus, writing against the ransom theory, asked, "And could the Father delight in the death of his Son"? (*Oration* 14.22. Cited in Bettenson, 49)

<sup>230</sup> *Cruciality*, 182.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

This emphasis on the will again expresses two themes throughout Forsyth's theology – a personal God and obedience. He does not have in mind an impersonal force when he writes of God's will. Instead the will is always connected to the One who wills. That is why the deity of Christ is so essential to Christian faith. God himself personally came to live and die for humanity's atonement. God is not a power behind the cross; God is in the cross. God does not send a messenger to inform humanity of his love, but delivers his love in the most powerful way possible – in person and by loving.<sup>234</sup> When the Son prays in Gethsemane, he prays not to an impersonal force, but to his Father. When he obediently goes forward, he does not succumb to circumstances or the plight of sinful humanity, but aligns his will with his loving Father's will. This again points to the deity of Christ because in freely obeying “he laid down a life that could never have been taken from Him, otherwise.”<sup>235</sup>

### **Obedience as confession of God's holiness**

God's holiness required not only judgment, but also confession of this holiness, a confession that must take place even before the confession of sin.<sup>236</sup> Only Christ could satisfy the requirements from the side of sin, because only he could meet, confess, and justify “a God of holy love with a love equally holy from the side of sinful man”.<sup>237</sup> He does so in his complete obedience that recognizes and accepts God's judgment of sin and confesses it silently in action and suffering. Christ could do what only God could do – confess in action God's holiness. And in so doing, he could simultaneously confess the sin of man. The suffering that Christ endures is not caused by God but by sinful humanity and is evidence of Christ's holiness, because “holiness

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<sup>234</sup> *Revelation*, 11.

<sup>235</sup> *War*, 139.

<sup>236</sup> *Cruciality*, 206-207.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

must suffer in the midst of sin.”<sup>238</sup> This suffering, however, is within the will of God through which the Son is the incarnation of God’s holiness in history which “necessarily makes sin so sinful and wickedness so furiously to rage.”<sup>239</sup> It is the “insatiably holy love” of God confronted by the severity of humanity’s sin that required God to give that which is “most deep in Christ” and “dear to God” – “Himself, His person, His vital soul, His blood.”<sup>240</sup> By going obediently to the cross, Christ confessed the holiness of God’s judgment and justified God’s treatment of sin. This act of confession stated, “Thou art holy as Thou judgest”,<sup>241</sup> and it is by this confession in the death and resurrection of Christ that God’s holiness is reestablished in the world.<sup>242</sup> This again points to the deity of Christ for only God could fully reveal the holiness of God.

### **The active obedience of Christ**

By Christ making this confession in his death, it is God himself at work as a self-justification before humanity and for humanity’s justification for reconciliation with God.<sup>243</sup> “God was in Christ reconciling” is the same as “Christ was God reconciling.”<sup>244</sup> The true depth of sin is not evidenced by the depravity of humanity but by who and what was required to eradicate it. The Son becoming incarnate, dwelling among his creation, and dying on a cross are not simply the drastic measures a loving God would take to be reconciled with his creatures, but the measures his holiness required in the face of humanity’s sin. Christ died as God, and for him to be any less does not deal adequately with “how deadly” sin is to God, that the Holy One and

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 214-215.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 27.

sin cannot exist in the same world.<sup>245</sup> Humanity's attempt to kill Christ shows the incompatibility; God's resurrecting of Christ shows the victory. The significance of the deity of Christ extends beyond a proper understanding of sin. It rules out any notion that Christ's death was not an act of his will but rather his succumbing to sinful humanity or resigning himself to fate. But in laying down his life he demonstrated his power.

The cross, therefore, was no martyr passivity of the finest prophet, led like a lamb to the slaughter; it was the work of a Messiah king with power over Himself. Christ never merely accepted His fate; He willed it. He went to death as a king. It was the supreme exercise of His royal self-disposal.<sup>246</sup>

A Christ who is anything less cannot be the foundation of a new ethic or "triumphant faith" and will result in "the incarnation of man", not God.<sup>247</sup> Christianity will fail without Christ as God dying on the cross, in part, because it will focus on the passivity and not the active obedience of Christ.<sup>248</sup> Christ will become only a good example whose gospel makes humanity aware of the divinity within each person. The focus will be on the kingdom of man and trust will be placed in Christian culture.<sup>249</sup> Failure to see the willful obedience leads to a lesser gospel. The cross is a mighty act of God that is more than the supreme expression of his love. It establishes once and for all his holy will and thereby a new creative act. A theology of the cross is incomplete without a theology of glory. In Forsyth's words, kenosis is insufficient without plerosis.<sup>250</sup>

### **SUBORDINATE BUT EQUAL**

The holiness of God is what has been rejected by humanity and what must be satisfied for reconciliation. Perfect obedience, which is holiness from the side of humanity and demonstrates

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 70-71. See also Ibid., 19, where Forsyth makes the view of the cross as only martyrdom a reason for disunity.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 67.

a complete surrender to the will of God, is the only acceptable satisfaction. It requires both willingness and competency. Only a God who is Trinity meets the requirements. But obedience must either be added to the Trinity or already present in it. For Forsyth, the obedience is present eternally in the Son who in being obedient responds in perfect love to the Father. Christ's humanity could not "contribute" obedience; otherwise salvation could not be an exclusive act of God. If salvation is not an exclusive act of God, then God could not redeem alone and needed humanity to do so. The necessity of a human contribution argues against the sovereignty, omnipotence, omniscience, and freedom of God and supports a more anthropocentric faith that leads to a diminishing of God and an elevating of humanity. If humility or obedience must come from humanity and has no source in divinity, according to Philippians 2, humanity contributes an essential element to the atonement. Hebrews speaks of Jesus learning obedience, but Forsyth would explain this as Christ becoming what he had always been. The obedience of Christ cannot merely be an added condition of the economy of salvation but must be grounded in the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father.

But Father and Son is a relation inconceivable except the Son be obedient to the Father. The perfection of the Son and the perfecting of His holy work lay, not in his suffering, but in his obedience. And, as He was Eternal Son, it meant an eternal obedience; for the supreme work of Christ, so completely identified with His person, could not be done by anything which was not as eternal as His person.<sup>251</sup>

Forsyth knows exactly what his opinion means regarding Trinitarian relations, but rather than begin with the presupposition that subordination must mean inequality, Forsyth stays with what he sees in the revelation to see that voluntary subordination does not mean ontological inferiority. The obedience of the Son to the Father means the subordination of the Son to the Father. Just as the early church accepted and then sought to explain the revelation of multiplicity in God, Forsyth accepts that in the Trinity equality and subordination are both present. "...*He*

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<sup>251</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Marriage: Its Ethic and Religion*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n. d.), 70.

*was not inferior to God, but He was subordinate. Subordination is not inferiority.*”<sup>252</sup> Forsyth connects this subordination with the Son’s respect for the place and order in the Godhead, making subordination divine. “The glory of Godhead He had, but it was the Godlike glory of subordination.”<sup>253</sup> He makes the point even more emphatically: “Subordination is *not* inferiority, and it *is* godlike.”<sup>254</sup>

It is clear that Forsyth holds to the orthodox Trinitarian position on the equality of persons and in fact sees it as essential for the atonement as the satisfaction of the holiness of the Father. But he sees no contradiction with regards to subordination among equals. In his kenotic theology, he accepted self-limitation and humility as divine. Self-limitation is an expression of God’s omnipotence whereby the Son will be recognized as Lord.<sup>255</sup> To make the point, Forsyth considers the words, “... he did not count equality with God as something to be grasped.” Forsyth compares this to Satan and Adam who did the opposite and tried to become equal to God. The rejection of proper authority is satanic; subordination to it is divine. Obedience to God is the work of Christ; disobedience to God is the work of the anti-Christ. Forsyth writes of an inequality between the Son and the Father, but from the context it is clear that he is not using “equality” to mean “equal worth”.<sup>256</sup> He is using the term with regards to the identity of roles within the Godhead. In fact, the Arian heresy was in part rooted in the error that the humility of Jesus recorded in the New Testament was a sign that Jesus was inferior to the Father. Drawing from Athanasius, Forsyth disagrees and sees the humility as a sign of equality.<sup>257</sup> In so doing, the

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<sup>252</sup> *Holy Father*, 42.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>257</sup> *Person and Place*, 79.

seeming paradox of a humility that is an expression of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22) is not foreign to God.

Humility and holiness are related, and Christ is the supreme example of this. A Christian understanding of freedom is inseparable from humility and authority. There is no freedom without humility in the face of the holy authority of God. Although holiness cannot be defined, it can be known in worship as it changes our sense of who God is. Humility is the response to this holiness, not merely through submissive acts “but the habitual and total and active obedience of the whole soul to the Holy in His act ... .”<sup>258</sup> For humanity, it is the full sense of God’s holy love that crucifies self and sets us free from the power of sin and grants the humility to love God’s way and to obey in a way that controls life and inspires it.<sup>259</sup> For the Son, the only One who truly knows the Father, this is the eternal relationship.

Obedience and subordination does occur within the Trinity without inequality of essence. True to his de-emphasis on metaphysics, Forsyth does not delve much into the conditions in the Trinity that make this possible, but he finds that the Son’s obedience is as divine as the Father’s will.

But obedience is not conceivable without some form of subordination. Yet in His very obedience the Son was co-equal with the Father; the Son’s yielding was no less divine than the Father’s exigent will ... There is an obedience bound up with the supreme dignity of Christian love, so that where most love is, there also is most obedience.<sup>260</sup>

The responsive love of the Son to the love of the Father is not a sign of inferiority but of particularity. This, taken together with the Son’s “perfect obedience of holy love”, would seem to point toward several conditions that make this equality and subordination possible. First, the

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<sup>258</sup> *Authority*, 474.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>260</sup> *Marriage*, 70-71.



relationship must be based in love that “has service for its principle.”<sup>261</sup> Forsyth’s entire theology is permeated with the holy love of God that is seen in the love between the Father and the Son. There is a reciprocating love and a mutual glorification of the other. In this way, obedience and freedom are not antithetical. Obedience as an act of holy love is an act of the divine will. Forsyth repeatedly emphasizes that the cross was not fatalism for Christ but an act of his will and a demonstration of his deity. He accepted the cross. He surrendered his will to the Father. He glorified his Father and his Father glorified him. Second, the particularity of the other person is accepted without denying equality. By not denying a substance ontology, Forsyth maintains this equality of deity that is evident in Scripture and essential to the atonement. Third, the role, or the expression of the love within the relationship, must depend upon the particularity of the Person and upon the will of the Person. The same love is expressed uniquely according to particularity of the Person and the relationship. Forsyth does this by focusing on a “metaphysics of action” in which he deals with how the equal but particular Persons love each other. For the Son, it is obedience. The divine unity is then expressed in the perichoresis, Forsyth’s whirlpool, where there is a perfect harmony of wills and actions. It would appear that from a relationship of perfect love expressed according to the particularity of the co-equal Persons a subordination of roles can indeed emerge.

## CONCLUSION

The eternal subordination of the Son to the Father is integral to the theology of Forsyth. Without it, the doctrines of the Trinity and the atonement fail leaving Christianity without grounds for its two most important beliefs. If subordination were denied, the eternal obedience of the Son to the Father must also be denied thus attributing the obedience in the economy to his

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<sup>261</sup> Marriage, 74.

human nature and not his divine nature. Without the eternal obedience of the Son, the atonement is not solely an act of God but relies on humanity. An atonement that satisfies the holiness of God with an equal holiness expressed in perfect obedience is impossible. While God often chooses to work through his creation, if obedience is not divine, it leaves God with no choice. He is dependent upon humanity to redeem. This is unthinkable for Forsyth who knows that the basis for the certainty of redemption is that God has always had the capacity within himself to save humanity and that he is independent and omnipotent. To deny the eternal obedience of the Son is to diminish God.

Without divine obedience seen in the eternal subordination of the Son, the self-revelation of God as holy love fails as does his attempt to make humanity holy. In Forsyth's understanding, God's holiness is the self-revelation of God in order to make all creation holy. But humanity showed itself incapable of responding to this holiness in obedience choosing instead to rebel against it. The obedience required was not in humanity and needed to be imported through the incarnation. Without it, humanity has no hope of redemption or reconciliation because it cannot offer the holy response required by a holy God. At best, the cross would be merely a historic example of supreme love rather than the act of the holy love of God not letting sin pass, but passing judgment and accepting it unto himself on behalf of those whom he loves. Christ would be but a martyr, not a Savior. Humanity would be without hope working to emulate the example of Christ and follow his teaching without the indwelling Holy Spirit to transform by bringing everyone to a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The belief that humanity was evolving into the kingdom was inadequate to address the existence and persistence of evil that continues to afflict the world with increased ferocity as the destructive abilities and aspirations of humanity grow. Without the divine obedience of the Son, reconciliation with God

could not be possible because God cannot simply set aside his holiness to have fellowship with those who reject his holiness. Grace then would be impossible. Eternal separation between God and humanity is the only alternative.

Forsyth clearly holds to the orthodox position of the equality of the Three Persons, but he maintains the particularity of each Person and demonstrates how that particularity is necessary for a proper understanding of God and what he has done for humanity. As with much of his theology, this is not a new position, but rather one he has arrived at after consideration of Scripture and the church's teachings. Kelly sees in the Cappadocian Father's thought subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father, the source of all being, but without any sense of subordinationism with regards to equality of being.<sup>262</sup> Source does not necessarily mean superiority of being for the Cappadocians just as authority does not necessarily mean superiority nor obedience inferiority for Forsyth. The sending by the Father and the responsive obedience of the Son are the particular ways in which Father and Son express the holy love common to them.

With perfect humility and obedience as eternal in the Godhead, the certainty of the eternal authority of God and the proper response to that authority is forever secured. It is not dependent upon humanity giving to God what it cannot and will not do on its own, but through the transforming power of the gospel, God infuses in people divine qualities that the world denigrates. He does not want to make humanity worse or less, but to elevate humanity by providing the true kingdom ethic of holy love that is expressed in humble loving obedience to the Sovereign Lord. The opposite is pride and the desire to usurp the authority of God, which has no place in intra-Trinitarian relations and can have no place in the lives of those called to share in the Trinitarian community. In being the Lord who is servant, Jesus Christ never lays down his lordship, but he does make servanthood the most important role in the kingdom.

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<sup>262</sup> Kelly, 263.

If subordination is essential in the atonement and humanity's reconciliation with God, the implications for humanity are obvious. Not so obvious perhaps is the way subordination particularizes the proper human response to the atonement. Through offering perfect loving obedience to the Father from humanity, Christ provided a way for humanity to participate in this loving obedience and thereby be in genuine communion with God – to have personal relations in Forsyth's words. From the experience of faith in Jesus Christ, this relationship is realized and ethics emerge. Note that the Christian life does not emerge by merely following a list of rules or principles or the example of others, even Jesus himself. The ethical life emerges from the personal relationship with God that is made possible by the obedient work of Christ. Loving obedience to God is the life of faith that emerges from the relationship established through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

In evaluating Forsyth's theology, one must consider his intent to express a distinctively Christian theology founded in the gospel recorded in the Bible and experienced in the life of faith. When faced with paradoxes or seeming contradictions between Word and Spirit, he does not take the easy path of eliminating one or the other but seeks to hold the revelation together through the difficult task of considering how the revelation should change the way he thinks rather than using his thoughts and logic to change the revelation. His approach and intent might be criticized by those who begin with different presuppositions, although one wonders how a truly Christian theology can be developed in any other way. The more relevant evaluation should focus on whether he succeeds in what he sets out to do. Is Forsyth's theology founded in the gospel and does he indeed hold together the revelation?

The New Testament supports the obedience of Jesus Christ to his Father in the recorded words of Christ himself who consistently distinguished his will from the will of his Father.<sup>263</sup> The Synoptics record the Gethsemane prayer of Jesus to align his will with the Father's will.<sup>264</sup> In John 6:38-40, Jesus not only distinguishes the Father's will, but also states that he has come from heaven to do that will. The distinction of wills is necessary to the understanding of the Trinity as three Persons as is the perfect alignment of the three wills, but in the passage Jesus gives priority to the Father's will as the source. Likewise, the understanding of the obedience of Christ as key to the atonement is found in Romans 5:19 and in Hebrews 10. Taken with 2 Cor. 5:19, which is often quoted by Forsyth, Hebrews 10:10 summarizes his understanding of the atonement. "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."<sup>265</sup> The will is offered freely by the Son to the Father, but the Son and Father are one God. While some might limit the obedience of the Son to the economy, Forsyth does not find in the revelation support for such a position. What he does find, especially in the kenotic passage in Philippians, is a link between the obedience on the cross with the self-limitation in the incarnation seeing both as divine. If the obedience of the Son is required for the atonement, as the New Testament reveals, the obedience could not be a temporary state, but it must be eternal. "But Father and Son is a relation inconceivable except the Son be obedient to the Father."<sup>266</sup> Likewise, Forsyth shares the biblical view (as discussed in chapter 2) that obedience is not a sign of inferiority and that this obedience reveals the distinction between the Father and the Son.

The Bible also supports Forsyth's position of the impossibility of humanity to offer the perfect obedience required. In Romans 3, Paul, quoting the Psalmist, writes that none is righteous

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<sup>263</sup> See for example Mt. 7:21, 12:50, and 18:14.

<sup>264</sup> Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42.

<sup>265</sup> Heb. 10:8.

<sup>266</sup> *Marriage*, 70.

and concludes that “... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ... .” No matter how much good humanity might attempt to do, it will always be from the position of rebellion against God. Reconciliation is required first, which cannot occur until God’s holiness is met with an equal holiness. The requirement of the perfect obedience of the Son indicates the grip that the sin nature had on humanity. For perfect obedience to be possible from humanity, humanity had to be transformed. This is not simply a restoration to some original state; Adam and Eve from that state managed to disobey. Instead, this is being made a new creation as 2 Cor. 5:17 indicates. The New Testament also connects love with obedience and as a result of being made new in Christ. John’s first epistle makes the connection between love and obedience most directly by stating that love is a commandment but that it can only be carried out by those who have God’s love as their new nature because they are born of God.<sup>267</sup> In other words, as Forsyth believed, obedience is an expression of who believers are rather than an adherence to an external code. If survival of the fittest underlies the ethics of the natural world, domination is the goal and subordination is a sign of weakness that must be eliminated. It is the spirit of the fallen world to be in rebellion against God and thus to devalue servanthood and obedience. It should not be surprising then to see humility, servanthood, and obedience celebrated in God’s kingdom of holy love and essential to Trinitarian community. How else can the spirit of domination be overcome?

Forsyth’s interpretation is consistent with the witness of Scripture attempting to take into account the entire witness and only rarely taking speculative journeys to where Scripture is silent. The theology echoes the early church fathers in several places and is certainly within the Reformed tradition though not entirely free of the liberalism of his youth. The emphases on the sovereignty of God, his glory and grace, the total depravity of humanity, and the finality and totality of the atonement are continual themes throughout his thought. It is on this last point that

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<sup>267</sup> 1 Jn. 4:7-5:5.

Forsyth struggles to find a consistent position. He sees the sin of the race dealt with totally and finally in the atonement and in an event whose application or compass is universal. He also understands that the benefits of the atonement must be appropriated individually by each person through faith in Jesus Christ. However, he knows from his observation of the world that everyone has not confessed this faith. As a result, he must deal with what he sees in Scripture as teaching that the entire race was redeemed with the undeniable fact that each individual member of the race has not been redeemed through faith in Jesus Christ. In an earlier work, he leaves open the question saying that salvation of the race does not necessarily mean salvation of each individual member.<sup>268</sup> But in one of his later works written during World War I, he cannot let the paradox remain as he has done in so many other cases. Rather, he goes beyond Scripture and even in contradiction of it to express a belief in post-mortem conversion to explain how all are elect though many do not realize it in this life.<sup>269</sup> Forsyth cannot conceive of God allowing any individual human being to be eternally beyond the kingdom yet he does not want to reduce the significance of faith in this life. Belief in post-mortem conversions seems to do exactly that and seems to be a compromise position that at least potentially can diminish the significance of the cross and the faith experience that Forsyth so vigorously defended. At minimum, the urgency of reconciliation is lessened because no matter how people live on earth, God will make it all right in the end.

By downplaying the metaphysics of the Trinity and focusing on the revelation, Forsyth keeps the emphasis on personhood, will, relationship, and action. The destiny of humanity is to experience true joy and fulfillment in perfect personal relationship with each other and with God

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<sup>268</sup> *Revelation*, 35.

<sup>269</sup> *Justification*, 153-154, 161. See also *This Life*, 33-36. Forsyth also believes that one can be a Christian without realizing it (*Authority*, 93), despite the New Testament emphasis on confession, which at minimum means a cognitive acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Lord. (See Rom. 10:9; 1 Jn. 4:15)

forever.<sup>270</sup> Humanity is not God and thus how God is Trinity is not essential to knowing how humanity can be Trinitarian. In fact in Jesus' prayer for the unity of the believers, he bases the oneness on the glory that he has given to them.<sup>271</sup> What is important is that Trinitarian relations are the relationships of equal persons who align their wills with one another thereby fulfilling their particular roles and carrying out their particular tasks in such a way that it is all who are participating in each action. God does not reveal how this occurs within his being, but God does reveal that it does occur and that his goal is that Christians share in this experience.

Because of this focus on the revelation, Forsyth can see the obvious application of his Trinitarian thought to human relationships. The aim of God who is Trinity must not be limited to the salvation of individual members of the race, but of the salvation of the race as a whole.<sup>272</sup> The Trinity does not only effect salvation, but also provides the foundation for society.<sup>273</sup> If authority and obedience as expressions of holy love are constituent of the divine relations, how much more so do they need to be in human Trinitarian relations. In an extensive and systematic work on the subject of authority, Forsyth states that "There is no social future without authority."<sup>274</sup> The authority is Jesus Christ and his cross through which he does not merely provide a supreme standard, but because of grace transforms humanity, giving us new life. It is not the authority of rules or propositions, but the personal authority required in personal relationships. This is an authority revealed through the life of Christ and an authority recorded in Scripture. It is also an authority experienced again and again through faith in Jesus Christ.

And faith is in its nature an obedience ... . Eternal Life is absolute obedience to One Who has a right over us high above all His response to us, One to be trusted and obeyed even

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<sup>270</sup> *This Life*, 30.

<sup>271</sup> Jn. 17:22.

<sup>272</sup> Forsyth, P. T., *Socialism, the Church and the Poor*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), 26, as cited in Bradley, 69.

<sup>273</sup> *Moral Guide*, 19.

<sup>274</sup> *Authority*, 4.



amid any dereliction by Him and refusal of His response. He is our God, not because He loved and pitied, but because in His love and pity He redeemed us.<sup>275</sup>

Obedience to divine authority is not negative if one keeps in mind that the authority is the omnipotent God who created, loves, and redeems humanity. It is this absolute authority that provides for humanity the certainty of the redemption. This is not an authority imposed upon humanity or one that humanity must work at to obey. Rather, this authority “creates its own obedience, rather than extorts or even elicits. Its Gospel creates its own belief. We know not how.”<sup>276</sup> Through the supernatural act of regeneration, obedience is no longer unnatural, but an expression of the new creation and communion with God. In light of this, freedom and equality have their true meaning. Freedom is limited by this obedience, and equality is “an equality before God of nothingness”.<sup>277</sup> Equality does not come from humanity. Human relations outside the kingdom are predicated on inequality, a survival of the fittest ethic that promotes individualism and joins forces with others only as a means of survival or increased power. True equality among humanity, and thus true Trinitarian community, is only possible when humanity realizes it has no rights before God. God, in his grace, makes humanity worthy to have the Word work freely in us. True freedom cannot be found in individualism in which the strongest seek at minimum to dominate and enslave the others. Indeed, outside of the kingdom true freedom among human beings can only occur through obedience that is an expression of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

To obey Christ thus is better than to be free; it is the only way to be permanently free, individually or socially; and without such obedience freedom is a curse. *Absolute* obedience is the condition of *entire* freedom.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 308.

Authority and obedience are necessary for Trinitarian society, provided again that they are divine, not human. Without an absolute authority, freedom fractures rather than unites and individualism is glorified and personhood denied. Divine authority and obedience create the conditions necessary for personhood and freedom so that right relationships can exist within humanity and between humanity and God. The predominant attitude is humility<sup>279</sup> and motivation is servanthood all within the context of holy love. Forsyth emphasizes repeatedly that this authority exists within us but originates outside us. It is a miraculous experience through which God regenerates humanity and establishes his kingdom.<sup>280</sup>

Instead of presupposing flawed human authority and obedience are all there are and cannot be appropriate to God, Forsyth looks to the Trinity to see divine definitions and examples in order to help human relations. In a divine sense, subordination and obedience are not inferiority if it is self-subordination and willing service, not slavery, and if it is an expression of love to One who is perfectly loving. “Service and sacrifice become now, in Christ crucified, the divine and common principle of love ... .”<sup>281</sup> All Christians are called to submit to one another and to the Lord. There can be no submitting without authority.

The subordination of the Son to the Father revealed in Scripture must be eternal if one sees in God’s purposes the reconciliation of humanity with the holy, unchanging God accomplished through a Trinitarian act of the holy love of the Father, Son, and Spirit. As such, obedience and servanthood are not inferiority or humanity doing good, but God being God. Divine subordination is therefore impossible for humanity to do on its own and can only be established by God through the transformation found in the new life in Christ. Without subordination, authority and obedience have no basis and Trinitarian community is impossible. A

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<sup>279</sup> Forsyth calls humility “freedom’s elder twin and guide”. (Ibid., 473)

<sup>280</sup> *Authority*, 338-342.

<sup>281</sup> *Marriage*, 74.

proper understanding of subordination is necessary for a proper understanding of God and how he has designed humanity to relate to one another. Forsyth has recovered this understanding by accepting the revelation of God as Three equal Persons not as a metaphysical puzzle to be solved but as a community to enter through faith in Jesus Christ.

## **CHAPTER IV. THE SOCIAL TRINITY AND SUBORDINATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Jürgen Moltmann has been one of the most influential Protestant theologians over the past 50 years. Throughout his career, his writings have reflected a concern for freeing Christianity bound by tradition and stymied by the erosion of the foundation of its faith in its confrontation with an increasingly scientific, skeptical world. The title of his first major book, *Theology of Hope*, sums up his efforts to bring to the fore the hope that the Christian message should provide not only for individual believers, but also for the entire world today and in the future. The source of this hope is the cross of Jesus Christ in which God entered history and suffered with creation in such a way that it shatters many of the conclusions of classical theism that have contributed to the problems the world confronts. Moltmann's hope is a hope in the kingdom of God that he believes the church must help lead the world toward.

Born in 1926, Moltmann grew up in his native Germany during the rise of fascism and was drafted to fight in World War II. He surrendered to the first British soldier he met and was a prisoner of war in Belgium and Great Britain from 1945 to 1948. While a prisoner, he was increasingly repulsed and ashamed by the atrocities of his country and through the help of Christians in the camp became a sincere Christian. In 1952 he became a pastor and later was a professor first at Wuppertal in 1958 and then the University of Tübingen in 1967. In the background of what he writes is his upbringing in a Christian nation that accepted the promises of Nazism with little resistance by the majority of people, including the state church. In many cases these promises were equated with the promise of Christianity. Moltmann seeks to distinguish the theology of Christendom, which had contributed greatly to the problems of

Western Europe, from what he considered to be true Christianity recorded in Scripture and believed by the early church.

His theological influences are wide ranging. In nearly all of them though, he finds the influence of a strict monotheism, which he does not believe is the Christian view of God and in fact works against the kingdom of God. The church believed in the doctrine of the Trinity, but for the most part could not see the significance of this doctrine other than acknowledging it as revealed truth that must be believed. With no real use for the Trinity, the church consequently relegated it to an exalted, yet irrelevant position and focused instead on various theological expressions that were based in a strict monotheism. Even theologians like Karl Barth, who returned the Trinity to a prominent place in theology, could not truly embrace the implications of the God who is Trinity. In Moltmann's view, Barth's primary view of God is as a single subject who reigns as Lord. The Trinity is affirmed, but the significance of the Trinity is limited to helping us understand how God created and redeemed. In addition, by starting with the unity of God, Barth has difficulty explaining why the Trinity is necessary and, according to Moltmann, retreats to a form of modalism.<sup>1</sup>

Moltmann wants to hold to a truly Christian view of God as revealed by Jesus Christ and recorded in Scripture. While he does not want to ignore the 2,000 years of theological development in the church, he wants to purge the theology of Greek philosophy and other influences that are not consistent with the revelation. This purging is a consistent approach that he takes in his works as he seeks to replace the strict monotheistic view of God with the Christian God who is Trinity and to examine the implications of that understanding. In part, this means beginning with the revelation of Jesus Christ in history and understanding God through

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981; reprint Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 139.

this revelation rather than emphasizing metaphysical descriptions of God that have obscured the revelation and as a result have given undue power to political and religious rulers who have the power to impose dogma and enforce adherence to it. It is not a rejection of metaphysics that Moltmann seeks, but a development of metaphysics from the revelation.

Moltmann divides his major writings into two groups. The first three were his attempts to present “the whole of theology in a single focus”<sup>2</sup> and include *Theology of Hope*, *The Crucified God*, and *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. The second group of writings is his more systematic “contributions to theology”<sup>3</sup> and includes *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, *God in Creation*, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, *The Spirit of Life*, *The Coming of God*, and *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*. Although Moltmann writes on a wide range of topics, common theological themes wind through each work, including themes of hope for all creation and God’s special compassion for the oppressed. Any doctrine, no matter how revered or “orthodox”, that runs counter to hope or ignores or oppresses the oppressed is not true Christianity in Moltmann’s eyes.

This chapter will look at Moltmann’s understanding of the intra-Trinitarian relationship of the Father and the Son and, in particular, the obedience of the Son to the Father, the implications this obedience might have on the subordination of the Son, and the role this obedience plays in Moltmann’s overall theology. Moltmann’s doctrinal positions are greatly interconnected, which makes it difficult to understand one specific doctrine without seeing the theological context and the connections to the rest of his theology. Because of this, this chapter will attempt to provide this context by beginning with Moltmann’s theology of hope that underlies all of his theology and gives the basis and direction for his eschatological approach to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xii. Moltmann distances himself from systematic theology but does say that these works do have a logical order.

theology. From there, the chapter will move to Moltmann's views on the Trinity and the work of Christ and how these are related to the eschatological kingdom. Throughout this chapter, the role of obedience in Moltmann's theology will be examined. The chapter will conclude by proceeding to the specific relationship of the Father and the Son to determine what role subordination might play in his theology.

### **THEOLOGY OF HOPE**

For Moltmann, Christianity is eschatology. Quoting in agreement with Karl Barth, Moltmann views Christianity as “wholly and entirely eschatology, not just in an appendix.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, any proper understanding of Moltmann's theology must see his eschatology throughout, an eschatology that can be summed up in the word “hope”. Eschatology, therefore, cannot be the end of all things nor a mere return to an Edenic past, but is in fact a transition to a new beginning when all things will be made new and God will come to dwell in his creation.<sup>5</sup> Because the future is God's future, it is certain and therefore as “real” as the present is and the past was. Therefore, Christian eschatology should interpret the past and influence the present manifesting itself in hope and movement toward the kingdom.

Exactly what the new creation is is not known, but being indwelt by God will give it certain characteristics. First, eschatology must be seen primarily as qualitative and not quantitative (i.e., time-related). If it must be thought of in terms of time, it is the future of the eternal God that he has personally brought into history to transform time. This removes any notion of the “becoming of God”, which is a temporal expression, and focuses instead on the “coming of God”. The eschatological quality is the new and better brought about by the eternal

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<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1996), xii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xiii.

God coming to dwell with and in his creation.<sup>6</sup> Second, eschatology is not primarily concerned with individual salvation, but corporate salvation. Third, it includes all of creation. Fourth, the result will be the freedom of all to love each other and to love God. This eschatological hope must be a universal, all-inclusive hope in which all will be free and all will share in the blessings of perfect relationship with each other and God. It is not true hope on a divine scale if all do not benefit. Universalism is consistent with the God who is love (for how can he damn what he loves), confirms that he is indispensable, and relies on his sovereignty rather than the subordination of God to human will. Faith has a role, but it is a result of salvation rather than its cause.<sup>7</sup> Moltmann finds it ludicrous to make salvation and damnation a matter of human decision, which would make those who reject God their own god.<sup>8</sup>

The connection of eschatological hope and love is also important to Moltmann's theology. It is not hope if it does not have effect in the present. The effect is love, which is a person's real identity and what it means to be human in the fullest sense.

An affirming, loving and accepting life is a truly human life. By virtue of this love we become living people – by virtue of this love we surrender ourselves to life – by virtue of this love we make others living people too.<sup>9</sup>

But this hope, along with the corresponding love, does not simply result in a feeling, but is “already acting here and today in accordance with the world of justice and righteousness and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26, 140, 259.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 110, 244. Moltmann reduces the role of faith and downplays the Scriptural distinction between the church and the world. The role of the church is reduced to ushering in the kingdom that all will eventually enter. Interestingly, he does not let go completely of individual faith, but like Forsyth, who follows a similar line of argument, must turn to post-mortem conversion to support his case.

<sup>8</sup> This is exactly Paul's point in Romans 1 in which he states that the rejection of God ultimately leads to making oneself God. This also seems to be part of the problem with the sin of Adam and Eve. Moltmann cannot have such freedom pre-conversion, because it would detract from his universalistic salvation. (See *Coming of God*, 109.) Later, Moltmann will espouse views of the self-limitation of God but cannot seem to apply that limitation here with the individual decision of faith.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 55.



peace, contrary to appearances, and contrary to all historical chances of success.”<sup>10</sup> This informs the role of the church in the world and provides a basis for understanding suffering.

The universal scope and the present-future outlook that is founded in the past historic events of the cross and resurrection are what give Christian eschatology power to transform the world today regardless of how hopeless situations might appear to be.

### **Two Problems with Eschatology**

Christian eschatology has two major problems: a mixing of Greek philosophy with Christian theology and the contradiction of current reality, especially of suffering, to the promises of God. Addressing the former is a matter of re-examining the sources of theology to determine what is revelation and what is importation. Addressing the latter is a matter of determining how this “purer” understanding of the revelation addresses the theodicy.

Regarding the first problem, Moltmann pinpoints one source of a wrong conception of God imported into Christian theology from Greek philosophy that led to a re-interpretation of the God revealed by Jesus Christ and recorded in Scripture. Parmenides believed reality was one, unchanging, timeless, and unmoving. Moltmann sees this belief as the primary source of this misconception, because it focuses on the “eternal present” and has no place for the past and the future because both are non-existent in this view.<sup>11</sup> In this existentialist context, the traditional futuristic understanding of Christian eschatology is either a far-off dream or a fairy tale with little purpose other than to bring modest relief through false hope to the oppressed who despite their situation still manage to believe that justice will someday prevail. There is little incentive

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967; reprint, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 28. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974; reprint, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 215.

for the oppressed to work to change their current state for whether they succeed or fail is of little interest to God and has little to do with his project. For Moltmann, this is the exact opposite effect that the gospel should have on one's life and the world. The answer is to understand eschatology through the biblical revelation of promise.

### **Revelation in Promise**

The solution begins by returning even to the word "revelation" and allowing the revelation of God to redefine the word rather than vice versa. Beginning with the definition of revelation too often leads to formalism.

Too little attention is paid to the fact that the expressions for 'revelation' in the biblical scriptures have completely broken out of their original religious context and are employed with a meaning of a different kind. This different kind of meaning is mainly determined by the events of promise.<sup>12</sup>

This is an important principle for Moltmann, who believes the revelation not only is founded in the promise of Scripture, but also transforms the meaning of words and ideas. The challenge for the student of Christian theology is to determine to what extent the revelation has affected the words that communicate it. To do this, one must begin with the particular and move to the general rather than the opposite approach, which is most often taken in theology.<sup>13</sup> In a biblical, Christian sense, revelation is found in promise and is itself promise.

Seeing promise in biblical revelation is crucial, because promise connects the past, present, and future. The promise made in history is being fulfilled in history and will continue to be so until completed. In addition, it is not the future of a transcendental eschatology in which the end is the same as the beginning. Promise moves forward to the new but is always connected to the past. Even Barth, who placed the resurrection as the eschatological fulfillment, left no

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<sup>12</sup> *Theology of Hope*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

future hope because the promise had been fulfilled. Moltmann argues that eschatology cannot be an addendum, but the future must be the promise “of the real goal and true intention” of the reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

The roots of revelation as promise are found in the faith of Israel recorded in the Old Testament, especially in the nomadic era from Abraham forward and even after the conquest of the Promised Land. Moltmann contrasts the cyclical, fatalistic agrarian world view (the foundation of Greek philosophy of religion) with the world view of faith and movement to a better future (more characteristic of the Israelite religion).<sup>15</sup> The self-revelation of God as Yahweh emphasizes the connection of the promise to the person who has always been true. History does not reveal God, but it does reveal his faithfulness. “Knowledge of God is then an anticipatory knowledge of the future of God, a knowledge of the faithfulness of God which is upheld by the hopes that are called to life by his promises.”<sup>16</sup>

Promise and revelation are also connected to the lordship of God, because God is revealed in his lordship and his lordship is revealed “where his promises of blessing, peace, and righteousness are fulfilled by him himself.”<sup>17</sup> His lordship is the hope in his promises and the only proper human response is obedience. The covenant must be kept which means obedience to the commandments, which “command what the promises offer”.<sup>18</sup> The commands are not a set of laws or rules or norms, according to Jesus, but love. While Moltmann gives little detail as to what else this means, he does indicate that the obedience to God’s commands is doing whatever

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 121.

moves us toward the ultimate goal of “the reality of human dignity which is vouchsafed to men through fellowship with the God of promise.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Revelation in promise as a theodicy**

The God revealed primarily in His relationship with Israel in the Old Testament is the God with whom Christian theologians should begin and not the God of Greek philosophy. Yahweh redefines what divinity is, because He is divine. The bridge to the New Testament is Jesus Christ, who is raised from the dead by Yahweh and is a Jew. Christologies that begin with Greek metaphysical definitions of divinity (i.e., unchanging, immutable, impassible, and unity) or the general view of the being of humanity in history are flawed from the outset. The proper beginning point is the historic, particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ, especially as seen in the cross and resurrection.<sup>20</sup>

By beginning with the cross and resurrection, one can see how promise addresses the second major problem of hope in the face of suffering. Christ in history does not provide only a martyr's death to be memorialized or a supernatural event to inspire. Rather, Christ identifies with humanity in its suffering by entering into it in the incarnation and on the cross and overcoming suffering and death in the resurrection. The hope of the resurrection is that there is another reality, a new life, but it is one that must pass through suffering if one follows the way of Christ. “It is only in following the Christ who was raised from suffering, from a god-forsaken death and from the grave that it gains an open prospect in which there is nothing more to oppress us, a view of the realm of freedom and of joy.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

Paul's theology is also a theology of the cross and resurrection. There is a fellowship of suffering that is a necessary part of the new obedience and is what it means to participate in the resurrection. The hope in the promise of the resurrection stands in contradiction to suffering and should drive the church to be in conflict with the world. "It makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come."<sup>22</sup> This is the significance of faith, because the historical-scientific world seeks patterns or similarities to verify and believe. But the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are unique events (as is the God-man himself) and cannot be repeated, and therefore, must always be a matter of faith and an interpretation of world history that provides great hope for the future.

The hope of the resurrection is new life with God, a life that is evidenced by the work of the Spirit. The suffering is not a contradiction, but a latency from which the Spirit brings new life. Until everything is all that God has created it to be and thus very good, the difference between hope and reality will remain.<sup>23</sup> In the Son we have a full revelation of what is to come and in the Spirit we have a foretaste.

### **Lordship, Kingdom, and Obedience in the Theology of Hope**

This eschatology of hope provides a distinction between lordship and kingdom. The former is "the eschatological subjection of man's existence to the absolute demand", and the latter brings out "the all-embracing eschatological breadth of his future, into which the mission and the love of Christ lead the man of hope."<sup>24</sup> The resurrection of Christ demonstrated that there

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 220. Moltmann is somewhat ambiguous in his use of these terms and uses them seemingly interchangeably at times. (221, 222)

is still a future, and it is the future of Christ. By raising Christ from the dead, God demonstrates, “His rule is his raising of the dead and consists in calling into being the things that are not, and choosing things which are not, to bring to nothing things which are (1 Cor. 1.28).”<sup>25</sup> The kingdom is, therefore, the activity of God and not simply the playing out of salvation history in the world. It is a new creation that “takes shape here in the suffering of the Christians, who because of their hope cannot be conformed to the world, but are drawn by the mission and love of Christ into discipleship and conformity to his sufferings.”<sup>26</sup> There is no inevitable evolving into the kingdom, which trivializes present suffering in light of a glorious future. Rather, there is a kingdom that has been won in the finished work of Christ. Present suffering is an integral part of the coming of the kingdom as Christians suffer in living out their mission and work to eliminate the suffering of this world.

### **Obedience as love**

The present obedience of Christians to the call of Christ helps to usher in the coming kingdom. It is motivated by the hope for the kingdom and the drawing of Christ. And as noted above, this obedience is love. This understanding is consistent with Paul’s view that there is still a “not yet” aspect to the kingdom and the Spirit is but a down payment (2 Cor. 1:22) on what is to come. Obedience that is love is the only proper response to God, and it is from new life in Christ that one is able to love as obedience. God then works through humanity which lives out this love to establish the kingdom that is here, but yet to come. Therefore, obedience is not to the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 222.

law or the keeper of the law, but instead to the crucified Christ who was neither and was raised from the dead and who “must reign”.<sup>27</sup>

### The obedience of the church

For Christians to be obedient, there can be no settling east or west of the Jordan until the promise is fulfilled. For Moltmann, that means the church must proclaim the gospel not just for individual salvation, but also for the realization of justice, equality, and peace for all. Until the kingdom has come in full, the obedient church is a de-stabilizing force in society preventing society from preserving unfinished forms and practices. “The Christian Church has not to serve mankind in order that this world may remain what it is, or may be preserved in the state in which it is, but in order that it may transform itself and become what it is promised to be.”<sup>28</sup> The desired state is the kingdom of God, the new creation, and it is a “horizon of expectation” that in and of itself is liberating.

Only when a meaningful horizon of expectation can be given articulate expression does man acquire the possibility and freedom to expend himself and to expose himself to the pain of the negative, without bewailing the accompanying risk and surrender of his free subjectivity.<sup>29</sup>

An obedient church has God’s project, the full establishment of his kingdom, as its project and will continue to work against all opposing forces no matter the cost. A compromised or marginalized church does not have the authority or the power to do the work of the kingdom. Such a church also is more likely to focus inward, ignoring the sufferings of the rest of the world.<sup>30</sup> Hope, kingdom, and obedience come together in the mission of the church as Christians with hope work obediently to usher in the kingdom willing to stand against the forces that cause

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 195. He is alluding to 1 Cor. 15:25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

suffering in the world even if it means their own suffering. Free obedience and liberation play key roles in the theology of hope and will be discussed further in subsequent sections.

### Summary

The theology of hope points toward a new creation in which all of the previous creation will be included and renewed for a greater future with God when he will be “all in all”. In God’s future, there can be no outcasts, no oppressed, and no sinners. There will be diversity without division and unity without uniformity. Even the oppressors of this age will be renewed and enjoy the benefits of the coming kingdom. Victims will stand as one with victimizers. In addition, nature will be restored as will a proper human attitude toward it. For this to happen, God must reign, but his reign will be one of love and not violence, force, and power in the fashion of worldly kingdoms. His reign will be over and through humanity.

With the certainty that God will accomplish what he has promised, the church has in this hope motivation to press on obediently in realizing this future now by going first to those in the greatest need and helping to relieve their suffering by both personalizing them and working to remove their oppression. This theology then has the double benefit of allowing people to experience the kingdom today, largely through loving relationships, and providing hope for those who are suffering by affirming that God has not forgotten them but has instead entered into their pain and will lead them to relief from it.

In *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann is not yet addressing the relationship of the Father and the Son in the Trinity, but he is introducing the significance of obedience. First, there is the suffering of Christ, which will later be understood as being done in obedience to the Father. Through this suffering God has entered into our suffering and has overcome it. As a result, we



can be assured he is with us in all situations and that everything is moving toward the fulfillment of his promises. Secondly, Moltmann connects love and obedience in such a way that at least for humanity they are the same. The only proper human response to the lordship of God is obedience, and this obedience is love. In addition, love is what it means to be truly human, which means obedience is what it means to be truly human. This obedient love comes as a result of Christ's love that draws us into discipleship. The obedience is to Christ and not the law. Without the obedience of the church, there is no advent of the kingdom.

There is an underlying tension in Moltmann's understanding of obedience and the kingdom. Although the obedience is love, it is nevertheless obedience, which implies some authority. The kingdom, according to Moltmann, is characterized by equality and freedom for all humanity. In his later works, this tension will influence his understanding of the relationship of the Father and the Son and the relationship of God to humanity.

This identification of love with obedience also has implications regarding the nature of God. God is love, John's first epistle states, and either the obedient love is alien to God's love or is somehow found in it. It is important then to understand more about Moltmann's understanding of who God is. To do so, this study will turn to his Trinitarian theology and his understanding of the cross.

## **TRINITY AND THE KINGDOM**

### **The Trinity is God**

Moltmann's model for the kingdom is the Trinity, and Moltmann views the Trinity primarily as Three Persons eternally, perfectly united as one God. An accurate understanding of the Trinity and its relevance to life is essential to true Christianity. "The modern surrender of the

doctrine of the Trinity or its reduction to an empty, orthodox formula is a sign of the assimilation of Christianity to the religions felt to be needed in modern society.”<sup>31</sup> As stated earlier, to have an accurate understanding, Moltmann wants to allow the revelation to condition human understanding rather than vice versa. The revelation of God is most fully known through the cross of Jesus Christ, where the Three Persons are revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit and not as a metaphysical divine substance. “Anyone who really talks of the Trinity talks of the cross of Jesus, and does not speculate in heavenly riddles.”<sup>32</sup> Any understanding of who God is should begin at the cross. Beginning with the Three Persons places the emphasis on their relationships and in so doing places the emphasis on love. It focuses more on what is known, because it has been revealed, rather than what is not known or can only be speculated about. As such, Trinitarian theology regains its relevance for the church and the world.

### **Problems beginning with oneness**

Not surprisingly, Moltmann finds that the major problem in the church’s understanding of the Trinity lies in the undue influence of Greek philosophy on the doctrine. As stated earlier, Parmenides is the source of the idea of the oneness of God that the early church had integrated into its theology. The error of the early church was to begin with the absolute substance as that which unites and makes equal, and the error of the post-Hegel church was to begin with the absolute subject. Both starting points are inconsistent with the revelation, focus on the question of how one God can be differentiated, and ultimately lead to a strict monotheism expressed in Trinitarian language. This has been a problem especially in the West from the Latin Fathers through Aquinas to the Reformers to many theologians today. Understood this way, Trinitarian

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<sup>31</sup> *Crucified God*, 215.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

theology serves little purpose other than to be an orthodox obscuring of the one God that the faithful will acknowledge in worship but with little understanding of the Trinity or the Trinity's relevance for their lives. As a result, strict monotheism has had a greater influence on Christianity and the world than Trinitarianism has. This can be seen in human relations, especially the authoritarian governance of societies and churches. In society, the one ruler acts for or as the one monarch in heaven. In the church, the structure is often hierarchical and anti-Trinitarian based on an abstract concept of unity and not on the pattern of the triune God, which would be "a community of free and equal men and women, for that is the community of believers and the baptized".<sup>33</sup>

By beginning with the unity of God, the church has the problem of beginning with human philosophy rather than divine revelation that leads to the transfer of an incorrect conception of God to human relations. In the process of relating who God is to who we are (i.e., finding how orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy), the starting point, the resulting theology, and the application have led to multiple problems from a Christianity that claims to be Trinitarian. By beginning with the Three Persons, the approach begins with the revelation, shifts the question to how three can be united as one God, which focuses on the relationships and maintains true Trinitarianism.<sup>34</sup> As much as monism and modalism are the dangers of beginning from the oneness of God, the threat of tritheism and subordinationism are risked when beginning with the threeness. Moltmann is cognizant of this and works carefully to maintain the equality, unity, and distinctions of the Three Persons.<sup>35</sup> The difference between a traditional and social understanding

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<sup>33</sup> *Coming of God*, 184.

<sup>34</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Some scholars do not believe he successfully avoids the charge. Brian Leftow argues that social Trinitarians in general are tritheistic and tend toward subordinationism. (247) T. F. Torrance, who otherwise appreciates Moltmann's insight regarding the involvement of the entire Trinity on the cross, states that Moltmann's tritheistic understanding of unity damages his insight. (247, n. 39) Pannenberg does not view Moltmann as a tritheist but as an

of the Trinity, however, lies not in the various heretical positions that are ever lurking, but in whether the primary focus is on the individual divine subjects and what makes them the One divine subject or on the Three Persons and how they relate so as to be one. Expressed anthropologically, the question is whether the focus is on the “I” or the “we”.

One of the dangers of Trinitarian theology is the problem of over-correcting to the point of error. Does Moltmann do this? Stephen Williams argues that Moltmann overstates the individualizing effect that strict monotheism has had on culture, citing the Old Testament emphasis on compassion, relationality, community, and love.<sup>36</sup> In support of Williams, it would seem that the complexities that influence cultures cannot be reduced to just one factor, and the Old Testament and history seem to bear this out. William P. Alston accuses Moltmann and other social Trinitarians of creating a false dichotomy between “substantialist unity” and relational unity, because he sees divine substance as an addition to perichoretic fellowship. For Alston, one unity does not have to be replaced with the other, but as Gregory of Nyssa noted, the commonality of divine substance is the basis for perichoresis.<sup>37</sup> Both of these are fair criticisms of Moltmann, especially as his theology develops. While he wants to remain faithful to Scripture, his interpretive lens of the social doctrine of the Trinity can prevent him from reading the biblical data in any other way and from seeing how his understanding can better inform and be better informed by opposing views. Unlike Forsyth, Moltmann is not trying to hold together apparent

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opponent of abstract monotheism. (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988], 334-335, n. 217)

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Williams, “The Trinity and ‘Other Religions’”, in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 34.

<sup>37</sup> William P. Alston, “Substance and the Trinity”, in *The Trinity: An International Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, (London: Oxford, 1999), 197. Sarah Coakley also states that Gregory did not prioritize persons over substance and was not a social Trinitarian, preferring more fluid analogies of the Trinity. (135-139)

paradoxes and as a result is much more liable to reject what does not fit in his understanding and not allow it to condition.<sup>38</sup>

### Unity in perichoresis

A revelation-based approach to Trinitarian theology eliminates the need for the speculative metaphysics developed to explain the Trinity.

The unitedness, the at-oneness, of the triunity is already given with the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. It therefore does not need to be additionally secured by a particular doctrine about the unity of the divine substance, or by the special doctrine of the one divine lordship.<sup>39</sup>

From this, it is clear that the focus should not be to look behind the revelation or to be concerned about defending the rule of the one God. Instead, the focus should be on the relationship of the three revealed Persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. Perichoresis, the mutual, perfect indwelling of the Three Persons, is key to Moltmann's social Trinitarian model. Originally a metaphysical Christological term, perichoresis eventually was utilized in the doctrine of the Trinity. A proper understanding of perichoretic unity denies simultaneously Arianism and Sabellianism. The perfection of the mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit affirms their unity, equality, and distinction. The Three Persons are eternally and completely indwelt by each other so that they are simultaneously the one God and the one divine community, making superfluous further speculation as to what might unite the Three. "By virtue of their eternal love they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one. It is a process of most perfect and intense empathy."<sup>40</sup> This is an application of Hegel's insight that a

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<sup>38</sup> As will be discussed later, Moltmann rejects all sense of lordship and replaces it with friendship rather than see how the relationship of the two might bring a better understanding.

<sup>39</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 150. This does not mean that there is no metaphysical existence of God or that metaphysics do not serve a purpose. It is a criticism of the primary place metaphysics has had in Christian theology.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

person is not simply one who exists in a personal relationship, but one who “only comes to himself by expressing and expending himself in others”, which in other words means “they realize themselves in one another by virtue of self-surrendering love.”<sup>41</sup> Full existence as a person even in the Godhead is not possible outside personal relationship with others.

While perichoresis is a crucial term for a social understanding of the Trinity, it cannot be divorced from other equally important terms, e.g., equality and distinction. The oneness that results from the perichoresis is in the Trinity a oneness of Three Persons who are distinct yet equal. Equality without distinction is monism. Distinction without equality defines perichoresis as nothing more than a complex way to express subordinationism, leading back to a strict monotheism.

### **The immanent Trinity**

This understanding of the perichoresis provides the context that allows the inner life of the community to be discussed. For Moltmann, the proper Christian conception of God the Father is not as the almighty but as the Father of the Son. As the Eastern Fathers emphasized, the Father is the unoriginate origin of all from whose nature (not the Father’s will) the Son emerges and from whom the Spirit is breathed. The Father is alone self-defined and defined in relationship with that which he originates, while the Son and Spirit are defined through the Father and their own relations. “But this inner-trinitarian ‘monarchy of the Father’ only defines the inner-trinitarian constitution of God, not the world monarchy of a universal Father.”<sup>42</sup> The concern here is the use of Christian theology in support of patriarchal religions that derive from a strict monotheism. If this is to be overcome, God must be seen as Trinity and not only as Father.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 165.

This monarchy also has “no validity within the eternal circulation of the divine life, and none in the perichoretic unity of the Trinity.”<sup>43</sup> The latter statement is made in the context of a refutation of all subordination. This would seem to erase the distinctions so that the conception of God returns once again to monism or modalism as though the Father self-differentiates for no apparent reason.<sup>44</sup> Moltmann instead holds to distinctions not in terms of origin, but in terms of love. The love shared between Father and Son is particular to the Person. For the Father it is engendering, fatherly love that sends and for the Son it is a responding, self-giving love that obeys.<sup>45</sup>

The inner Trinitarian distinctions must not come from metaphysics but from the revelation of God in history in which the Father sends and the Son is sent. The sending-sent is the historical correspondence of the order of origins. This is not just an assertion or logical conclusion but is critical for the kingdom. “Otherwise there would be no certainty that in the messianic mission of Jesus we have to do with God himself.”<sup>46</sup> Because the kingdom is ultimately about God’s glory through a personal relationship with his creation, salvation can be nothing other than God himself coming to save and to impart the divine life. No created being could accomplish salvation on this scale and with this end. In addition, God does not create and send a subordinate to suffer, but he comes and suffers and dies himself. While Jesus’ address to God as “My Father” is a new revelation of God, it is not a new relationship in the Trinity nor is it a new God. The revelation is new, but it is the revelation of the same God who creates, redeems, and loves.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>44</sup> Bauckham notes that there is a tendency in social Trinitarianism to “flatten” or “blur” distinctions. (161-162)

<sup>45</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 168.

<sup>46</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (London: SCM Press, 1977), 54.

Miroslav Volf believes that by distinguishing between constitution and relations, Moltmann has successfully maintained the distinctions in the Trinity without subordination and attempts to explain Moltmann's position by citing that the Son is from the Father, will return to the Father, and has been given all things by the Father.<sup>47</sup> However, even in Volf's explanation, the Father is the one who sends and gives. As indicated in the previous paragraph, Moltmann believes the sending of the Son is the historical correspondence of the origin precisely so that we can know with confidence that we are dealing with the same God. Despite Volf's claim, the subordination of the Son remains. Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that Moltmann unnecessarily pits monarchy against perichoresis. "Instead the monarchy of the Father is itself mediated by the trinitarian relations."<sup>48</sup> Affirming Moltmann's emphasis on mutuality seen in perichoretic love, Pannenberg adds that unity and mutuality also apply to the monarchy of the Father. Paul Fiddes, who rejects Moltmann's two-level view, believes that all flows from the Father, but that this can be a "mutual constituting" in the sense that the Son and Spirit "make the Father what he is through their self-surrendering love".<sup>49</sup> Moltmann cannot accept either of these positions, because he does not want the monarchy of the Father to have any influence beyond origins.

Moltmann appears arbitrary in distinguishing the monarchy of the Father as only constitutive.<sup>50</sup> If he is asserting that the monarchy of the Father has to do with how the Trinity was constituted, he would be correctly stating the obvious. However in distinguishing between "create" and "beget", Nicene theology relied on the idea of eternal begetting or eternal generation. Otherwise the Son and Spirit are not eternal. Therefore, the monarchy cannot be said

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<sup>47</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1996), 180.

<sup>48</sup> Pannenberg, 325. This is much more in the spirit of Forsyth. Moltmann seems to lose his way because he wants to eliminate anything that hints at subordination even though he acknowledges that it is needed to maintain the distinctions.

<sup>49</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 80.

<sup>50</sup> This is more of an assertion rather than an argument defended by Moltmann.



to have no validity within the divine life. In fact, he appears to base his distinction between the Father and the Son's love on this monarchy when he refers to the Father's love as "engendering". This would seem to be somehow connected to the Father as the source of all being and thus his monarchy. The equality of the Son and the Spirit with the Father comes from their eternal processions from the Father, which also distinguishes their relationships. Similarly by connecting the sending of the Son by the Father with the origin of the Son from the Father, Moltmann sees a direct relationship. For Moltmann, the value in relegating the monarchy of the Father to being only constitutive of the Trinity is as a statement against patriarchal religion<sup>51</sup> and in support of replacing lordship with the rule of love that is not only compatible with human freedom but is in fact constitutive of it.<sup>52</sup>

By limiting the monarchy of the Father to the constitution of the Trinity, Moltmann risks erasing the distinctions between the three persons in relationship. On one hand, he must maintain the distinctions to avoid the strict monotheism he sees in other theologies, while on the other hand, he has to limit this distinction to the constitution so that his understanding of the Trinity can be a model for equality and freedom in human relationships in the kingdom without any trace of lordship or rule. For Moltmann, there is no room for even a trace of authoritarian structures because these are precisely what he believes are the problem for the world. This is an example of the tension in Moltmann's theology regarding obedience/authority and equality/freedom. He knows distinctions are needed in the Trinity, but the revealed distinctions all indicate authority and obedience.

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<sup>51</sup> Moltmann also qualifies this statement by indicating that the origins are needed to maintain the distinctions, but must be considered in light of the eternality of the Persons and that this order of origin is unique. (*Trinity and the Kingdom*, 165) As will be discussed in later sections, Moltmann also indicates that the Son will hand the kingdom over to the Father and all things will be subjected to the Father.

<sup>52</sup> Bauckham, 158. Bauckham notes that Moltmann is diverging from tradition when he limits "this element of subordination" (i.e., the monarchy of the Father) to the constitution of the Trinity. (161) However, he speaks approvingly of Moltmann's conclusion.

Commenting on Moltmann's attempt to hold together our participation in the fellowship of the Trinity and the Trinity as a model for human society, Richard Bauckham notes that Moltmann obscures the differentiated relationships we have with each person of the Trinity and that the Trinitarian persons have themselves.<sup>53</sup> While Bauckham's argument is directed elsewhere than Moltmann's limiting of the monarchy of the Father, it seems to stem from the same tension between obedience/authority and equality/freedom. Moltmann notes that even the word "person" when used of the Father, Son, and Spirit can point to their commonality rather than their particularity. But Bauckham argues that Moltmann himself cannot escape this problem.

In summary, love is the basis for the unity and the distinctions in the immanent Trinity. Perichoresis takes the place of metaphysics in explaining the unity and distinctions, and the eternal love of the Father, Son, and Spirit is what allows the perichoretic unity. It is this same love, however, that provides the distinction. But can Moltmann's understanding of Trinitarian love have this double usage? It could if Moltmann is willing to distinguish between love, which would establish unity, and the expression of love, which could show distinctions according to the particularity of the Person and the relationship. He states that the Father has engendering love and the Son has responsive love, and he sees the mission of the Son as corresponding to the procession of the Son from the Father. In doing so, he seems to understand the point, but he does not want to make too strong of a connection between love and the monarchy of the Father. If he did, he could argue that the Father then would love as the unoriginate origin and the Son would love as the only begotten. Because Moltmann sees the monarchy of the Father as the source of patriarchal religions, he does not explicitly make this connection. Even without this connection being developed, Moltmann does see obedience in the love of the Son for the Father. However,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 161.

in his protest against authority and metaphysics, he does not develop adequately how authority in the context of Trinitarian love can be positive and does not have to be oppressive.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Centrality of the Cross: the Crucified God**

To understand the Trinity and the kingdom of God, one must understand the cross of Jesus Christ. The theology of hope and the theology of the cross are but two sides of the same coin, with the former remembering Christ by looking at the hope of the resurrection and the latter remembering Christ in the hope found in his death. Through the sufferings of Christ, the incarnation of the future is seen in the world's sufferings and not only in the hopeful fulfillment of the promises of God.<sup>55</sup>

Trinitarian theology must be understood in the context of the cross and the experience of those saved by it. The revelation of the Trinity by the cross and the subsequent experience of those who benefit from it come together to transform theology, especially Trinitarian theology.

If the central foundation of our knowledge of the Trinity is the cross, on which the Father delivered up the Son for us through the Spirit, then it is impossible to conceive of any Trinity of substance in the transcendent primal ground of this event, in which cross and self-giving are not present.<sup>56</sup>

Understanding who God is cannot be properly done outside the concrete reality of the cross, because at the cross God is revealed in the highest expression of his love for humanity – God crucified. All Trinitarian theology must begin and remain at the cross, but the cross can only be properly understood in light of the resurrection. The two are inseparable. Therefore, the Christian God cannot be distant because of either impassibility or his death, but rather was, is, and forever will be intimately involved in his creation. The assurance of our hope is that because God was

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<sup>54</sup> Bauckham also notes that in *Trinity and the Kingdom* Moltmann overwhelmingly depicts obedience even to God as oppression. (163)

<sup>55</sup> *Crucified God*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom* 160.

with us and for us in the suffering of the cross and because the resurrection demonstrated that the cross was not the end of him but a new beginning, we know that nothing can separate us from such a God.

### **The suffering love of God**

At the cross, Moltmann places particular emphasis on Jesus' cry of abandonment by the Father, because in it he sees a radical revelation of God: (1) God suffers and (2) God is Trinity. This cry is central to the death of Christ and as such is central to all of Christianity. "In the face of Jesus' death-cry to God, theology either becomes impossible or becomes possible only as specifically Christian theology."<sup>57</sup> God cannot be properly understood outside of this cry and as a result Christian faith cannot be properly lived.

At the cross one sees most clearly the contradiction between the Greek philosophical apathetic god and the passionate God of the Old and New Testaments. The Greek concept of God left only two options, an incapacity for divine suffering or fateful subjection to it. The church preferred the former. However, the cross, if God is dying there, reveals a third option: the omnipotent One voluntarily laying down his life or limiting himself not because it is fated but because he freely chooses to do so on behalf of the ones he loves.<sup>58</sup> Jesus stated that the greatest love is laying down one's life for another, which implies that love always holds at least the possibility of suffering. Since the highest love in response to God's love requires an exercise of the will, if there is no suffering there cannot be true love between God and man, and in fact, God

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<sup>57</sup> *Crucified God*, 153.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 230. Moltmann also refutes the classical theistic belief in the unchanging nature of God using a similar argument. "If God is not passively changeable by other things like other creatures, this does not mean that he is not free to change himself, or even free to allow himself to be changed by others of his own free will." (*Ibid.*, 229)

would not be capable of love.<sup>59</sup> This is inescapably true for God who has perfect love for imperfect, yet willful man. However, through this suffering love, God transforms evil into good and chaos into order.<sup>60</sup> This is done not by condemning but by confronting us with the love of the Son who is made sin, dies for us, and rises again thereby forgiving us and breaking the power of sin and death.

But this is not just God the Son suffering nor is it the Son suffering only in his humanity. This is the Father suffering as only the Father can, not the pain of death but the grief of death for his Son and the separation experienced. Metaphysical explanations obscure the depth of the divine tragedy, and in so doing, miss the revelation of a passionate God who loves even though love can cause suffering. If there is no suffering, there is no love. This is not patripassianism in the classic sense that the Father is suffering on the cross in the same way as the Son, but it is the suffering of the Father for his Son and consistent with the passionate God of the Old Testament who is neither an immoral, pathetic pantheon nor an aloof, unfeeling monad.<sup>61</sup>

One of the key Scripture passages for this position is 2 Cor. 5:19: “God was in Christ reconciling the world ...”. In this verse and the surrounding context, God is the subject of the reconciliation as well as the individual activities within the reconciliation. Paul is not pointing out the divine and human nature in Christ. Rather, he is locating God the Father in the life and work of the Son and in so doing implying that the Father and the Son suffer together but in particular ways.

In the passion of the Son, the Father himself suffers the pains of abandonment. In the death of the Son, death comes upon God himself, and the Father suffers the death of his

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<sup>59</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. Moltmann is summarizing and affirming C.E. Rolt.

<sup>61</sup> Gunton criticizes Moltmann for making the Father too passive in speaking repeatedly of the Father’s grief. (*Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes*, [London: SCM Press, 2002], 126) Overall, this is a valid criticism, particularly in *Crucified God*. It is understandable given Moltmann’s concern for demonstrating that God does identify with the suffering and his minimizing of God as powerful Lord.

Son in his love for forsaken man. Consequently what happened on the cross must be understood as an event between God and the Son of God.<sup>62</sup>

For a truly Trinitarian view of God, patripassianism in some sense of the term seems to be a corollary. A God who is love could not watch the suffering of his Son and experience the separation and not in some way suffer, even if he knows what the ultimate outcome will be. There is still pain in the process. Heretical patripassianism is likewise excluded by a proper view of the Trinity, because Father and Son are equal and one, but not identical, with the Son as the only one who experienced physical death and suffered in this way. All who love suffer, but not all who love suffer in the same way.

### **Trinity revealed in God-forsaken God**

In the cry of abandonment, the cross is shown to be primarily concerned with the relationship of the Father and the Son.<sup>63</sup> Throughout the gospels, Jesus speaks of his oneness with the Father speaking of “My Father”, identifying his words and actions with the Father’s, and forgiving sin. On the cross, this oneness is altered in such a way that the Son experiences it as abandonment by the Father presumably because the Son who knew no sin was made sin (2 Cor. 5:21). This abandonment is what makes Jesus’ death unique; no one else will ever know the unity of the Father and Son and so no one else can ever experience the pain of separation to that degree. “The cross of the Son divides God from God to the utmost degree of enmity and distinction. The resurrection of the Son abandoned by God unites God with God in the most intimate fellowship.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Crucified God*, 192.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 152. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993; orig. pub. London: SCM Press, 1990), 173.

Moltmann is not speculating how the one divine nature could be so divided, because he does not find the language of one divine nature in the narrative. Instead, Jesus, the Son of God, is dying on a cross and crying out the deep reality of his experience that the God he knows as Abba, Father has forsaken him. That is what the prayer of Gethsemane is about. How this is happening is not as important as what is happening – the Son who has been made sin experiences abandonment by the Father, regardless of the nature of it, yet he still obeys the Father and in so doing maintains unity with the Father in the unity of their wills. Although all seems lost, he still obeys because his responding love to the Father’s love has not stopped even though he feels forsaken. That loving obedience in the experience of abandonment reveals the infinite power of the love of the Father and Son, proving it to be truly unconditional and eternal. It is the one surrendering will of the Father who delivered his Son and the Son who willingly gave his life in obedience to the Father that maintains their unity in the abandonment.<sup>65</sup> The engendering love of the Father and the obedient love of the Son never end.

It is not only the Father and Son revealed in the death-resurrection narrative. The resurrection, particularly, reveals the Spirit as this indwelling power of divine love that is in Christ and comes upon the followers of Christ and to the entire world. Thus the cross reveals the Trinity by showing the Three Persons distinct, yet united in their love for each other and their love for the world.<sup>66</sup> That is why, when properly understood, John’s statement “God is love” summarizes the cross and the Trinity.

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<sup>65</sup> *Way of Jesus Christ*, 174. See also *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 95.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

## The work of Christ

Moltmann rejects atonement theories that clean up the cross and fail to see the full pain and suffering that it represents. These theories produce inadequate doctrines that have done much damage to the church and the cause of Christ throughout the centuries. Adopting a phrase used by Luther, Moltmann believes that what takes place on the cross can best be summed up in the words “crucified God”. This is a scandalous theology that no one would desire or devise.

For he who was crucified represents the fundamental and total crucifixion of all religion: the deification of the human heart, the sacralization of certain localities in nature and certain sacred dates and times, the worship of those who hold political power, and their power politics.<sup>67</sup>

No human being is God or can become God. Likewise, no place, day, or age is more sacred than any other. Only the unique, incarnate Son of God who was crucified by the political and religious powers of his day can make the claim of being human and God. This crucified God promises no fulfillment of one’s beliefs and hopes based in this, because he was condemned by the judgment of the world and executed as a criminal yet overcame the world’s judgment. As a result we are no longer bound to the standards of the world. Rather, this God keeps at the fore the “pain of repentance and fundamental change” as one is constantly confronted with the truth.<sup>68</sup>

Transformation occurs because of this pain that results in a love that must seek out and love what is opposite. In more practical terms, the believer accepts the mission of Christ and follows it even though it is in direct conflict with the world.

Moltmann is not proposing a masochistic, mystical form of the example theory, which is nothing more than self-exaltation disguised as piety. Christ’s cross was unique because he suffered alone; we suffer with him, therefore we cannot fully follow his example. In fact the cross as a display of God’s grace runs counter to any of man’s attempts to know God, which are

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<sup>67</sup> *Crucified God*, 37.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.



filled with self-justification, self-assertion, and self-deification.<sup>69</sup> Rather the cross of Christ leads to the taking up of one's cross, denying oneself, and breaking all links with the world. "[The follower] is 'dead' to this world, so that he no longer has any rights and any claims upon it. But he lives in the life-giving spirit of the new creation, is governed by it, and walks in a renewed life."<sup>70</sup> This is then not just crucified God, but resurrecting and resurrected God. The cross and the empty tomb must be held together for the resurrection brings the proper interpretation of the cross. Jesus Christ did not come just to suffer and die so that humanity could begin with a clean slate, but he came to bring new divine life, who is the Spirit. If there is no resurrection, all Jesus taught about the kingdom dies with him on the failure that is the cross.<sup>71</sup>

In *Crucified God*, Moltmann does not use the language of substitutionary atonement choosing instead the word "representative", which has a dual meaning that "substitution" does not. God is representing himself and in so doing revealing himself, but he is also there suffering for humanity, taking on our sin, and receiving the rejection and anger. "God was in Christ reconciling ... ." God simultaneously reveals himself to us while identifying with us.<sup>72</sup> This must be understood in a Trinitarian way in that God is revealing himself through Christ by delivering up his Son who gives up himself in self-surrendering, self-emptying love. However, as stated earlier, the cross and atonement cannot be fully understood without the interpretation that comes from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without the resurrection, Christ on the cross is at best the first example of Christian martyrdom and at worst the failure of an eschatological prophet. From the resurrection looking back to the cross, the death of Christ is more than a model of love to follow and more than just expiation. Expiation cannot be eliminated, because it does reveal the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 191-192. Moltmann is interpreting 2 Cor. 5:19.

grace of God who sent his Son so that helpless man could be freed from guilt, be made righteous, and be reconciled with God for communion with him. Even so, this is simply a return to the Garden of Eden and provides no assurance that this cycle of sin and death will not recur. The cross seen from the resurrection demonstrates that the death of Christ was the beginning of a new life and a new righteousness. “Only Christ’s representative suffering and sacrifice ‘for them’ in his death on the cross brings hope to the hopeless, future to those who are passing away and new righteousness to the unrighteous.”<sup>73</sup>

This one man, sent by God, communicates the liberating righteousness of God to us through his death and resurrection, because God is not simply raising a man who has died, but one who was condemned, executed, and abandoned.<sup>74</sup> This is the scandal of the cross that reveals the new righteousness of faith because Christ died for all, the victims and victimizers, breaking the negative cycle of vengeance and creating a new humanity.

Only where righteousness becomes creative and creates right both for the lawless and for those outside the law, only where creative love changes what is hateful and deserving of hate, only where the new man is born who is neither oppressed nor oppresses others, can one speak of the true revolution of righteousness and of the righteousness of God.<sup>75</sup>

Through the transforming power of love that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus in the form of the Spirit, all oppression ceases and the kingdom of righteousness is established. There is an inevitability to this coming kingdom, because the present unrighteous world cannot stand against the righteousness of God. The kingdom, however, is not yet fully here, thus suffering remains.

Through the cross, Christ enters into the world of the suffering. Through his resurrection, he reveals new life and a new hope that can be experienced even in suffering. In a world still

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 178.

suffering, the hope of the resurrection is modified by the cross to be an ongoing reality in liberating love. The crucified Christ, who is also the risen Christ, is in history and making possible that the certain future kingdom can be experienced in reconciliation during the struggle to become, always giving hope that we will overcome.

With the cross as an interpersonal matter between Father and Son, it cannot lead to a religion or law or ideals that ultimately move salvation from the sphere of grace to that of works. Properly understood, the cross as a personal revelation of God can only lead to a personal relationship with God.<sup>76</sup> From confrontation with the crucified God one knows the pain of repentance that leads to the denial of self and love for others, especially those the world deems unlovable, a love that is made possible by the indwelling Spirit, the divine life. God is love, and our experience and expression of that love is via the Holy Spirit. Although this belief has an ethical expression, it is not a reduction of faith to ethics but an acknowledgment that the orthodoxy of the crucified God can never be separated from orthopraxy. This corresponding orthopraxy has no end until all of creation is renewed. In summary, this orthopraxy is not just an expression of love, but of the suffering love of God.<sup>77</sup>

Moltmann understands the problem of an over-realized eschatology that he believed Barth and others held. This type of eschatology concludes that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ finished the work of redemption for the entire world, a redemption that is being lived out through history. However, the finality in this theology is located in the past and while it might give confidence to those prospering and already possessing hope, it eliminates any possibility for hope in this world for those who are suffering and hopeless. Seeing theology as promise provides hope in the certainty of the future of Christ without neglecting the very real suffering that is

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 277.

experienced every day. Moltmann distinguishes between justification-reconciliation, which are already, and redemption, which is not yet. Through Christ, the justification of the godless and the reconciliation of enemies have already been effected, but the overcoming of enmity, the resurrection of the dead, and the new creation are not yet.<sup>78</sup>

The certainty of the kingdom and the finality of the justification of the cross lead inevitably to salvation for all. If all have been justified, forgiven, and reconciled with God, all will be part of the new creation. Unlimited atonement is more than just the offer of salvation to the oppressed and oppressors; it is the accomplishment of it. Thus any thought of a final judgment cannot be punitive.

Is it conceivable that in the final judgment the coming Christ will act in contradiction to Jesus and his gospel, and will judge according to the penal law of retaliation? He would then put Jesus himself in the wrong, and would be appearing as someone different, someone Christians do not know, and therefore a universal judge whom they would have to fear. Any such clash between the Christian faith and the Christian hope would be unendurable. It would destroy the consistency of the Christian message.<sup>79</sup>

This is a consistent application of Moltmann's understanding of the gospel and his eschatological hermeneutic. If the future is certain because it is God's future and forgiveness for all has been accomplished in the atoning death of Jesus Christ, final judgment in Scripture must be interpreted as grace regardless of the actions and beliefs of individual human beings. Eliminated from consideration is any significance to individual faith with regards to being in or out of the kingdom. It has been settled; all will be in regardless of what they believe.

Moltmann reintroduces the question of the theodicy here in different terms – for how can a good, loving God welcome the unrepentant and unfaithful as his children. Such universalism turns salvation by grace alone through faith alone into a cruel twisted divine joke in which unrepentant victimizers, whether as individuals or corporately, are united with their victims

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<sup>78</sup> *Way of Christ*, 32.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

eternally. What kind of hope is it when victims know that the most heinous crimes can be done to them, and the only justice brought on the victimizer is the justice of grace and forgiveness? The answer seems to be that the victimizers will eventually repent when confronted by grace over time, but this brings little comfort to the victims who suffer in the interim. What is the justification for suffering when it seems it could be avoided by transforming the victimizers now rather than over time. By bringing together this universal salvation and a de-emphasis on personal faith for salvation, the question about God's justice is recast into a more insidious form: If the new creation was God's objective all along and it is all-inclusive of the old creation, why did he not just create the new first? Is it because he could not or that this was the best of many options? If all given sufficient time in confrontation with the love of God will eventually be transformed, why must so many suffer now?<sup>80</sup>

The freewill theodicy is based on viewing suffering as acceptable only if it is necessary to achieve a sufficiently high objective. While the objective of the new creation and the existence of suffering are not in question, the necessity of suffering to achieving the objective is. If one accepts that the establishment of a true divine-human relationship based on love is a sufficient objective, the necessity must be connected to the free exercise of the will so that love can truly be love. Moltmann loses this necessary connection when he combines the certainty and universality of the kingdom with a de-emphasis on personal faith. Human beings ultimately cannot reject God. As stated earlier, he believes that allowing people's decision to determine their eternal state takes away from God's sovereignty. This seems to be an arbitrary retreat to a position that Moltmann goes against when writing about God's sovereignty including the ability to self-limit. If God can self-limit, is there any reason he cannot do so with regards to allowing

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<sup>80</sup> The answer, which Moltmann does not give, seems to center on this creation process as a display of God's glory. The greatest display of his glory is not overwhelming the will, but through time patiently working with us all and bringing us to repentance.

people the opportunity to choose whether to receive or reject his offer of grace, love, and forgiveness? It seems that it would be consistent to affirm both or neither.

This is not to say that Moltmann does not see a significant role for faith in Jesus Christ and for the church. True faith is confessing that Jesus is the Christ of God and spreading and living this gospel in the world.<sup>81</sup> This faith apparently results from or leads to “the knowledge of God in the perception of the crucified Christ”, which causes the person to be born again into new life from the Spirit of the resurrection.<sup>82</sup> It is not simply a propositional faith. It has a necessary ethical dimension demonstrated in obedience by following the way of Christ through discipleship. Discipleship is not for the development of personal piety but is the “ethics of the community of Christ” and best seen in the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. As such, the ethics should never lead to an elitism or separatism but constantly drive believers to the people outside the church.<sup>83</sup> However, personal faith is not a prerequisite for being in the kingdom. This has already been accomplished in the universal forgiveness won and granted on the cross. The church’s mission is not to become the assembly of the kingdom but to help usher in the kingdom.

Perhaps unintentionally, Moltmann’s focus is external and the Christian life is one of imitation. In criticizing Moltmann’s view of the social Trinity as a model for society, Bauckham notes the disregard for the transforming power of the indwelling Spirit, who “makes us like Jesus in his community with the Father and with others.”<sup>84</sup> In the move to eliminate individualism, which in Moltmann’s view leads to tyranny, he has minimized, even eliminated, the role of the Spirit. While Bauckham is not specifically referencing personal faith, he is pointing out a

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>84</sup> Bauckham, 161.

weakness in viewing the Trinity only as a community that we participate in or emulate and not also as experienced through the Spirit who indwells.

### **The church of the crucified-resurrected God**

The church of the crucified God on mission bears the righteous love of God to the world but always with constant vigilance that it is not compromising the theology of the cross to be more acceptable to or comfortable in society or to support or validate the rulers of this world. To hold to and live any other gospel than the gospel of the crucified God is to fail to be Christ followers. The experience of the cross, the new life of the resurrection, and the hope for the not yet fulfilled, but certain promise of God prevent the church from settling or over-identifying fulfillment with the church in process or any secular government, kingdom, or power. The church lives in the overlap of the ages and must be ever mindful of the already, not yet aspect of its existence. Faith believes backward that the past of Jesus Christ has granted forgiveness to the world and forward that the future of Jesus Christ is a certainty, despite the present reality that includes suffering, death, and pain. This is why the faithful refuse to give up until his future is fulfilled.<sup>85</sup> Failure to understand the church's mission between the cross and the parousia can leave the church open to adopting other visions if it forgets the cross or to viewing itself as an extension of Christ if it forgets the parousia.<sup>86</sup> The church is not an extension of Christ, but it is an extension of his mission to the poor, the sick, and the sinners through the power of the Spirit. As such, its theology cannot ignore the cries of those who suffer or worse side with their oppressors. "But it must come to terms with the cry of the wretched for God and for freedom out

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<sup>85</sup> *Crucified God*, 106.

<sup>86</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 22-25, 75.

of the depths of the sufferings of this age.”<sup>87</sup> Its theology must also lead the church to alleviate the suffering and remove its causes not by trying to conform the world to its image or by conforming itself to the world, but by standing against the world and breaking its cycles of violence.<sup>88</sup>

The church then is not the kingdom of God, but it is a foretaste or anticipation of the kingdom tasked with helping the world move toward the kingdom. As such, it must not be exclusive, but inclusive, even open, living out eschatological hope and freedom in the world today. In addition, the church cannot view itself as the only instrument God has in the movement toward the kingdom, which means it needs to cooperate with other elements.<sup>89</sup> The church provides a living example of the kingdom to the world and helps to move the world toward the kingdom.

It should be noted that the church is not necessarily the church as an institution, although the institution can be included in the church. Instead the church is wherever creation is liberated and human beings are united with each other, nature, and God and wherever people take up the cross and participate “in the history of God’s dealings with the world.”<sup>90</sup> The church proclaims the Word and serves the oppressed with the purpose of infecting “people, whatever their religion, with spirit of hope, love and responsibility for the world.”<sup>91</sup> While evangelism in terms of the proclamation of the gospel and the establishing and growing of churches through baptism and discipleship are important, what is more significant is the effect that the church has on the world. This means the church has no real business in proselytizing, but instead should be in dialogue

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<sup>87</sup> *Crucified God*, 153.

<sup>88</sup> *Way of Christ*, 131. The cycles of violence must be broken through non-violent means, which remove any justification for the use of violence by those caught in the cycle.

<sup>89</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 53.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.



with people of other religions and of no religion and through this process spread the effects of the gospel without necessarily preaching the kerygma.

The cross then links Trinitarian doctrine to the world and the struggle toward establishing God's kingdom. However, a church of the crucified God must accept its mission and stand against anything, even its own institutions, its culture, or its secular government, that stands against the establishment of this kingdom. It extends beyond an individual salvation of believers that removes sin and provides a future reward. Christ's atoning work renews all of creation completely today and for all eternity. The great hope of the future is a present reality as God's kingdom emerges through the continued suffering for freedom.

### **The Trinity as Kingdom**

Moltmann's understanding of the kingdom is directly connected to his doctrine of the Trinity. Trinitarian community is the kingdom. There is a direct relationship between the Trinity and human relations with the perichoresis of the divine persons as the archetype for human community and all creation. The kingdom is "to throw open the circulatory movement of the divine light and the divine relationships, and to take men and women, with the whole of creation, into the life-stream of the triune God: that is the meaning of creation reconciliation and glorification."<sup>92</sup> However, two competing views emerge when trying to understand what this means. First, he states that the destiny of all creation is to join in the eternal obedience and responsive love of the Son to the Father.<sup>93</sup> Second, and he emphasizes this point much more, he states that the kingdom is about the liberation of humanity even from the lordship of God. Since God is love and God is Trinity and both truths are revealed in the cross, the kingdom cannot be a

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<sup>92</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 178.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

worldly conception of “kingdom” on a heavenly scale. Nevertheless, it is a kingdom. Here again the tension first identified in *Theology of Hope* appears as Moltmann sees the significance of the obedient love of the Son, but he sees this as contradicting the freedom of humanity that is integral to the kingdom.

As opposed to intra-Trinitarian love which is necessary, the outflow of love from the Trinity is free, and seeks and desires a free response.<sup>94</sup> Moltmann is ambiguous here, because he also believes there is a sense in which God needs the world and man and must be with the ones he loves.<sup>95</sup> Necessary intra-Trinitarian love also seems to be will-less love and somehow inferior to willed love and certainly not personal if having a will is a prerequisite for being a person. However, Moltmann clarifies somewhat by stating that God does not love as human beings “out of ‘deficiency of being,’” but “on the basis of the divine fullness of being and superabundance of life which desires to communicate itself.”<sup>96</sup> In other words, God does not love because he is lacking love or someone to love nor is he a closed circle of three. Instead, he loves because he is love and life and as such wants to self communicate. Through this outflow of love God creates, redeems, overcomes death, and unites. The unity is not limited to sharing a common purpose or common feeling. It is perichoretic unity that is shared in intra-Trinitarian relations as well as relations between the Trinity and creation, a mutual indwelling that is panentheism.<sup>97</sup>

This kingdom is the full and perfect image of God that can only be reflected to this extent in the community of persons found in the kingdom. An individualistic interpretation of the

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<sup>94</sup> Fiddes finds this distinction driving a wedge between the economic and immanent Trinity. Moltmann cannot see that the disruption in the divine relationship involves the free response of the obedient Son. (*The Creative Suffering of God*, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1988], 138)

<sup>95</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 55.

<sup>96</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 56.

<sup>97</sup> While Moltmann sees a distinction between panentheism and pantheism, Gunton does not. (*The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 141-142) See also Henri Blocher, who holds a similar view to Gunton's. (“Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology”, in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 118)

*Imago Dei* is a failure to see that God is the perfect community united by the eternal perichoresis, which is the source, model, and hope for the unity of all creation.<sup>98</sup> The Trinity reveals that true community can only occur between persons and that true personhood can only be experienced in community. In addition, “The more open-mindedly people live with one another, for one another and in one another in the fellowship of the Spirit, the more they will become one with the Son and the Father, and one in the Son and the Father (John 17.21)”.<sup>99</sup> This is not surprising if one sees the revelation of the Trinity first of all in terms of relations and not substance. People would then reflect the image of God primarily in their relations with each other.

### **Lordship**

To understand Moltmann’s conception of the kingdom, it is important to understand his complex, even inconsistent, use of the term “lordship” and related terms such as “rule”, “obedience”, and “authority”. As stated in the section on the theology of hope, God is revealed in lordship, which means both the hope and fulfillment of his promises of blessing, peace, and righteousness. But lordship can also be contrasted with the kingdom in which kingdom takes on more of the previous definition of lordship and lordship is used in a negative sense. Obedience, and presumably authority or commands, are also defined in a positive way with obedience being a proper response to the promise of God demonstrated in helping to usher in his kingdom. Both what is obeyed and obedience itself are defined as love that suffers in standing against the world and in helping the oppressed.

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<sup>98</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 157.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

This continues in his later writings in which “lordship” is not only the glorification of God and the righteousness of God when human injustice and violence will be gone,<sup>100</sup> but also inferior to reciprocity and insufficient to sustain a community<sup>101</sup> and marked by possessing, using, and exploiting another.<sup>102</sup> As a contrast between human lordship and divine lordship, this difference is understandable. In fact, the relationship of the two can be seen in numerous examples in which obedience to the lordship of God leads to liberation from oppressive human lordship. “The lordship of God whose efficacy already reaches into this history of injustice and death, is accordingly to be understood as the newly creating, life-giving activity of God.”<sup>103</sup> This concept of lordship is found first in the Old Testament where the purpose of a king for God’s people was not intended to be about power but about protecting the poor, the marginalized, the weak, and the oppressed in Israel.<sup>104</sup>

At times, Moltmann also differentiates between the rule of God and the rule of humanity. For example, in *Crucified God*, he writes: “The rule and the kingdom of God are no longer reflected in political rule and world kingdoms, but in the service of Christ, who humiliated himself to the point of death on the cross.”<sup>105</sup> The rule of Christ is extended only through “liberation from forms of rule which make men servile and apathetic and the political religions which give them stability.”<sup>106</sup> What has happened through the revelation of God is a transformation of lordship itself from the power-grabbing, enslaving, oppressive rule of men to the humble, self-sacrificing, liberating rule of Christ. Moltmann makes the case for this in part by

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<sup>100</sup> *Way of Christ*, 196.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>102</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 171.

<sup>103</sup> *Way of Christ*, 98. See also in *Church in the Power of the Spirit*: “... freedom in the fellowship of created being ...” (104); “... essentially liberation from the violence and pressure of ‘the powers of this world’” (294); and “... for the life of this world” (192).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>105</sup> *Crucified God*, 327.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

reversing the New Testament and early church confession “Jesus is Lord” to be “Lord is Jesus,” which he says better emphasizes the humble, self-surrendering view of Jesus.<sup>107</sup>

One might conclude that for Moltmann there are two types of lordship, one that is oppressive and needs to be replaced by the other which is selfless and sacrificial love. There are three problems with this conclusion. The first is that if divine lordship is epitomized by humility and self-sacrifice, it must still retain some authority or power to transform people who live according to human lordship (whether ruler or ruled) unless the assumption is that they have already have been or inevitably will be transformed. People who believe the world is about domination and “survival of the fittest” view selfless love as weakness whether they are rulers or the ruled. As previously stated, Moltmann avoids this problem with a determinism that combines the certainty of the kingdom with universal salvation. Over time, all will eventually accept the rule of God by being confronted by the rule of God. But even here, there is a succumbing to a power or an authority. While Moltmann is making a strong statement about the power of God, either there must be an elimination of true human choice in favor of determinism, which reopens the question of the theodicy, or there is a belief that some spark of goodness must remain even in the most heinous of criminals that grows in confrontation with God. There also seems to be an idealized view of the poor as being basically good people who have been forced into difficult situations and that once liberated will use their new found freedom and power for the kingdom and not to become rulers and even oppressors themselves. History has not evidenced this. By minimizing the significance of the decision of faith and the resulting transformed life and knowing the weakness of an example theory of the atonement, Moltmann appeals to a

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<sup>107</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 102. This is an unnecessary revision by Moltmann and is an example of the reading an interpretation into the text that clearly is not there.

forgiveness that has already been completed for all and a future that has already been determined for all although it still must be worked toward.

The second problem is that he defines the rule of God as the service of Christ. If being in the kingdom is in some respects being like Christ, it would seem that one should see servanthood as desirable. But does not being a servant imply that there is someone to serve? As discussed in chapter two, the Bible has a positive view of obedience and service. Moltmann seems to understand this but cannot escape the negative connotations of these terms and ultimately wants to minimize or reject them.

The third problem is that in Moltmann's theology there is a trend toward the elimination of all lordship, even that of God. The lordship of God will be replaced by friendship with God.

### **Friendship replaces lordship in kingdom**

The Trinity as kingdom is true community and fellowship that is marked by friendship, not lordship. This is friendship offered by God to humanity and shared by humanity. When considering gospel passages related to the friendship of Jesus in Luke (7:34; 11:1-10) and John (15:13-17), Moltmann makes the connection initially to prayer as "the highest stage of human liberty" where man "as the friend of God participates in his lordship."<sup>108</sup> It is in prayer that the mutual freedom and respect comes to the fore, in which the one praying persistently requests but never assumes God is obligated to do what is asked. Aware of various understandings of "friend", Moltmann clarifies that Jesus is not referring to the modern individualized, primarily emotional concept of friendship that ultimately turns inward or to the Aristotelian friendship concept of "like for like", but instead to a friendship that constantly reaches out to those who are

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 119.

different. “Open and total friendship that goes out to meet the other is the spirit of the kingdom in which God comes to man and man to man.”<sup>109</sup>

In this kingdom of friendship, there is no place for lordship nor servitude, but rather “a mutual and common participation in life”.<sup>110</sup> Because of what God has done, the choices are not limited to individualism or authoritarianism. “His freedom is his vulnerable love, his openness, the encountering kindness through which he suffers with the human beings he loves and becomes their advocate, thereby throwing open their future to them.”<sup>111</sup> God’s freedom is further demonstrated in his selfless sacrifice and patience with his creation. Through these, he pays the price for humanity’s freedom. God loves and awaits the responding love of humanity, a response not merely of obedience to a Lord but as children to their Father.

The picture of the kingdom is more than a community of friends then, because at least one member, God, is also, and presumably uniquely, Father. But this does not imply inequality. “In this kingdom there are no servants; there are only God’s free children. In this kingdom what is required is not obedience and submission; it is love and free participation.”<sup>112</sup> Although Moltmann does not eliminate the term “lordship”, he does reduce it to the point of it having little meaning. What meaning is left if lordship has no responding obedience (even the obedience of love) or submission or service? This is exactly what Moltmann concludes as he rejects the understanding of “Father” to mean “Lord over everything” and replaces it with “the Lord of the coming liberty of the universe”.<sup>113</sup> A liberated universe has no need for a lord, and thus the Lord of the coming liberty is lord of nothing. God’s purpose is to secure humanity’s freedom even from his lordship so that he can be fulfilled in his friendship with His children.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>110</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 56. Cf. *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 118.

<sup>111</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 56.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 71.

In the fellowship of the Son, sons and daughters talk to God as to a Father. God does not speak like the master or lord who has to be unquestioningly obeyed; God listens to the requests and suggestions of his children like a Father. The men and women who are liberated through the Son are not supposed merely to listen and obey; they can also ask, and share decisions. In the context of the spirit of sonship, the sending of the Son shows nothing less than the opening of the fellowship of the Father to his own Son, and the opening of the fellowship of the Son to his Father, for the world.<sup>114</sup>

God in his kingdom appears to be as an equal who allows his children to participate even in decision making. This must either be a charade of the omniscient or it is a denial of that omniscience and an affirmation that the input of humanity is actually needed so that proper decisions can be made. The latter seems to be the case, which means Moltmann has moved from lordship to friendship to conciliarism. This is more than just how people address God or how God listens, but it is the opening up of the fellowship of the Godhead so that humanity can enter as equals with each other and God. A similar argument is made with regards to Jesus being the Son, which Moltmann takes to be a name and not a title. Sonship connotes the kingdom is one of brothers and sisters and not of the Lord and his servants.<sup>115</sup> But even brotherhood cannot communicate the free, new, open relationship that friendship can, which is why friendship is the preferred term. Friendship comes from personal decisions made freely and is combined with respect.<sup>116</sup> The obedience/authority-equality/freedom tension is cut here with Moltmann moving decidedly to the latter. To do so, he imports meaning into Scripture that the context does not support.

Moltmann draws this definition of friendship in one instance from the friendship of Jesus displayed in his earthly ministry to those considered unclean by the religious leaders and society as a whole. In Luke 7:34, Jesus said that he was criticized for being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners”. Moltmann sees that through the forgiveness and fellowship that Jesus gives to these

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>116</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 316.



outcasts in Jewish society, they will gain respect as people, be liberated from unrighteousness, and have their true humanity revealed.<sup>117</sup> By identifying with these people, Jesus was breaking barriers first and foremost in their lives and perhaps secondarily in the lives of the “righteous” who could begin to see their error in labeling these individuals and failing to treat them as people. The kingdom then begins with those who are considered outsiders and eventually will extend to all. The admonition to focus on ministering to the oppressed is certainly one that the church needs to hear. However, there is no indication in this text that Jesus is replacing lordship with friendship.

This definition of friendship is also seen in Jesus’ only direct statement on the subject. Jesus reveals to his disciples in the *inclusio* John 15:12-17 that his relationship with them has changed from master-servant to friend-friend. Moltmann understands this as Jesus replacing lordship with friendship, but the passage shows that this is not the case. “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (14), and what has been commanded is from the Father. Obedience is the condition for the friendship and the reason for promoting the disciple from servant to friend. Verse 16 continues this understanding with Jesus stating that the disciples did not choose him, but he chose them and commissioned them to go to bear fruit. It is only in the context of this relationship, which Christ initiates and sustains, that the disciples can ask anything in the Father’s name with full confidence that he will provide. Love is the command (13), and the command is fulfilled when the disciples obey by bearing fruit that abides (16-17). Rather than friendship providing the context for lordship, lordship provides the context for friendship. In addition, Jesus is clearly speaking to his disciples in distinction from the world, which is indicated in verse 18 in which he uses a first-class conditional sentence indicating that the world will hate his disciples. In addition, the point that Jesus is making by calling his disciples

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 117.

“friends” is not about authority, but knowledge. With a blind, unquestioning obedience, the servant obeys as ordered by the master. On the other hand, the friend is told “all that I have heard from my Father” and is not objectified as a tool or work animal, but treated as a person who can understand, appreciate, and gain from having a larger view of what the master is doing. A friend of the Lord has the right to question and to receive an answer, but for the purposes of gaining knowledge and improving service, not to improve the Lord’s plan or decide not to obey.

This interpretation of Jesus’ statements in John 15 is supported throughout the rest of the New Testament and in the early church’s practices. “Jesus is Lord”, not “Jesus is friend”, is the dominant confession of faith and understood relationship.<sup>118</sup> There is no other self-designation of Jesus as friend (φίλος) than in John 15.<sup>119</sup> Human obedience to God is a common admonition to believers in the New Testament writings of Paul, John, Peter, and James, but it must be understood within the context of a faith relationship with God through Jesus Christ that transforms believers in such a way that they are empowered to love and because they love, they obey. Even in the restoration of Peter (Jn. 21:15-17), it is not enough for Peter to think, profess, or feel love, but he needed to demonstrate love, not in some grand gesture of heroic sacrifice, but by obediently feeding and tending the sheep of Jesus.

This can also be seen in the pairing of “forgiveness” with repentance, belief, and confession throughout the New Testament.<sup>120</sup> Moltmann emphasizes much more the forgiveness

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<sup>118</sup> For example, Rom. 10:9 and Phil. 2:11.

<sup>119</sup> In Mt. 11:19 and Lk. 7:34, Jesus uses the word “friend” in quoting what others say about him. In a parable on prayer in Lk 11:5-10, Jesus appears to assume the role of friend in the story and Moltmann does cite this, but the point of the story is not friendship in prayer, but persistence in prayer. Bauckham also points out that Moltmann is unscriptural when he places friendship in the kingdom of the Spirit. Jesus is the one who calls his followers friends, and the Spirit makes a relationship with Jesus possible. (163)

<sup>120</sup> For example, Mt. 9, Mk. 2, and Lk. 5; Mk. 1; Mk. 4; Lk. 17:3; Lk. 24:47 Jn. 5:14; Jn. 8:11; Acts. 2:38; Acts 5; Acts 8; Acts 10; Acts 13; Acts 26; Rom. 4:7; 2 Cor. 2:3; 1 Jn. 1:9. Moltmann’s answer to this are accounts of Jesus forgiving without preconditions. (*Way of Christ*, 114) If this means Jesus’ forgiveness, like his love, is unconditional, this is correct. However, as the above verses show, the need for repentance accompanies nearly every mention of forgiveness.

that Jesus gives to sinners and in so doing downplays the necessary human response to the gift. Jesus creates the grounds for friendship through forgiveness, but friendship is reciprocal. It is wondrous that Jesus offers forgiveness and friendship to us, and though the offer is unconditional, we experience the benefits of it through repentance, faith, and loving obedience.<sup>121</sup> This connection between friendship and forgiveness places forgiveness in the context of personal relationship and love. This is consistent with the mission of Jesus, who in rebuking the Pharisees, states during a great feast in his honor "... I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Lk. 5:32) It is true that Jesus befriends sinners by meeting them where they are, but he refuses to leave them there without offering the way out. The way begins with repentance.

The New Testament teaching quite clearly and emphatically retains lordship and obedience as integral to the kingdom. Moltmann acknowledges that the acceptance of sinners by Jesus is not his justifying of their sin and that Jesus is concerned with transforming their self-perception as well as their oppression that comes from the perception of others.<sup>122</sup> He is correct in emphasizing Christ's decisive and indispensable work in making this happen. However, with little to no mention of the personal responsibility of people to acknowledge and repent of their contribution to their condition, the victims might be empowered to be freed from their situations, but remain victims nonetheless. In Exodus, it was insufficient to free the tribes of Israel from Egyptian slavery if the Israelites were not able to free themselves from the bondage generations of slavery had bred in their souls, families, and communities. Freed slaves are still slaves.

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<sup>121</sup> To clarify further, God's forgiveness is unconditional and our confrontation with it has a drawing power on us to repent and receive it. This is paralleled in human relationships where one party might forgive another unconditionally, but the other person cannot fully experience this forgiveness if this person does not feel he or she has done anything that requires forgiveness or if he or she does not feel worthy to receive it.

<sup>122</sup> *Way of Christ*, 114.

This is not to say that friendship is not an important term that can provide a fuller understanding of divine lordship than the more traditional hierarchical authoritarian understanding. As Moltmann notes, the friendship of Jesus is characterized by a reaching out to those outside, especially the disadvantaged and downtrodden, with the purpose of delivering them from their poverty and suffering. “Like cleaving to like” only leads to closed homogenous circles of friends that find meaningful relationship inward but in so doing create barriers between themselves and those who are different. If Christianity is to emulate the friendship of Jesus, it cannot turn inward, but must be open. Divine friendship also helps overcome the distance between Christ and the church implied in Christological titles and emphasizes that God’s objective is an intimate, personal relationship with humanity. With this eschatological focus, friendship becomes a powerful term expressing both what is wrong with the world and what can make it right. “Without the power of friendship and the goal of a friendly world there is no human hope for the class struggles and struggles for dominance.”<sup>123</sup>

However, Moltmann elevates friendship too high when he supplants lordship and while he begins with Scripture, he must cut the ties to Scripture to place friendship where he thinks it should be. The following are some ways to retain this powerful term while remaining consistent with the teachings of Scripture.

1. *Friendship is an ends and a means.* In Jesus’ response to the Pharisees, he says that he came to seek sinners so that they might repent. Through friendship, Jesus is able to create the opportunity for repentance, not necessarily the inevitability of it. But friendship that is only a tool is manipulation of the worst sort. Jesus is being a friend to sinners so that the sinners might repent and become a friend to Jesus. True friendship, which must be reciprocal, results.

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<sup>123</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 116.

2. *Jesus is both Lord and friend.* If divine friendship is typified by like for unlike, the lordship of Jesus Christ particularizes his participation in the commonality of his friendship with us. Our participation in this friendship is not only recognition of who we are, but also recognition and respect for who Jesus is as Lord. As Lord, he will participate in the friendship as only the Lord can, which includes providing direction. As his creation, we will participate as only we can, which includes obedience.

3. *The human response to the friendship of Jesus is obedience.* As stated earlier, obedience is not set aside for friendship with the Lord, but becomes the evidence of it. The obedience of friends who obey out of love and respect for their friend who is Lord is not the obedience of servants who obey out of duty or fear of punishment.

4. *Proper obedience is impossible through human effort alone.* The obedience of friendship, which is the obedience of divine love, must result from the life of one who has been born of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

5. *The church as an open fellowship parallels the friendship ministry of Jesus.* This means the church must not close itself from the world but must constantly seek friends among those who are outside the church, especially among the ones considered outcasts and sinners. But these friendships must lead those outside toward a friendship with Jesus Christ.

Lordship cannot be set aside for friendship nor can friendship be ignored. Rather, they need to be held together in a proper relationship. Is friendship a redefinition or replacement for lordship as Moltmann suggests or does friendship help complete our understanding of lordship? The evidence from Scripture and the early church supports the latter position; however, the evidence from the church through history to today also shows that the friendship of Jesus is too quickly forgotten and lordship is then emphasized and defined without this important

understanding. The Lord is our friend, which he publicly and eternally declared when he laid down his life for us. He is on our side, and he loves us. However, without lordship, there is no basis for obedience and without obedience there is no basis for friendship with Jesus. Lordship then provides the basis for obedience, which is the stated condition for friendship with Jesus. Kept in this context, friendship is a significant term that gives a proper definition of divine lordship.

### **The self-limiting God**

Moltmann makes a careful distinction with “friendship” language explaining that although humanity can experience God as a friend there is no equality of being implied as there would be among human friends. While friendship in the context of prayer ensures God will hear the prayers of his friends, there should be no expectation by the one who is praying that God is obligated to do what is requested.<sup>124</sup> Despite these qualifications, the overall view appears to elevate humanity, albeit through God’s work, and diminish God. This more egalitarian conception of God and his kingdom requires a reduction of God for it to be meaningful. As stated above, friendship that results in sharing in decision making means God is not omniscient otherwise the sharing is superfluous and deceptive, not merely self-limiting. It also means that a God who loves “expects and needs love”<sup>125</sup> from others outside of himself. This limitation of his omnipotence and sovereignty is consistent with Moltmann’s criticism of classical theism. While this gives the impression that God is needy, he does not create because he must, but as an expression of who he is, an expression of his love. In the God who is love necessity and freedom

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>125</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 99.

coincide.<sup>126</sup> Moltmann seeks to resolve the tension of placing necessity on a sovereign God by moving to the underlying love nature of God. In certain respects, God is not compelled to create nor does he choose to; he simply does so as an expression of the love that he is. As discussed earlier, the need for love in God is not from a lack as though something is missing, but from his nature, which is love, and the superabundance of that love that flows out. This understanding veers closely to the logic of Origen's belief in the eternality of matter. If creation is a natural expression of God's being that he does not choose, is he not an eternal fountain of creation?<sup>127</sup> The alternative would be that God existed, perhaps still does, as incomplete at least until the world was created, an option process theologians and others might affirm, but one that does not fit well with the biblical data.

By redefining this necessity as an expression of the divine being who is love, Moltmann believes he has escaped the contradictions and goes on to describe the intra-Trinitarian process through which God creates as an expression of love. The Father alters his love for the Son through a contraction of the Spirit, and the Son responds to that love through an inversion of the Spirit, thus opening "the space, the time and the freedom for that 'outwards' into which the Father utters himself creatively through the Son."<sup>128</sup> This intra-Trinitarian decision or covenant points toward a self-determination and self-limitation of God the Father and not just of the Son as kenotic theories have argued. If God is indeed omnipresent, creation *ex nihilo* is impossible because everything has God's presence. Therefore, to create *ex nihilo* God must first create nothing by withdrawing from a portion of space and eternity. There can be no outward movement of the omnipresent unless there is first an inward movement.<sup>129</sup> This is not an

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>127</sup> Fiddes also sees Moltmann making creation necessary for God. (*Creative Suffering*, 73)

<sup>128</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 111. Moltmann acknowledges the parallels to federalist theology.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 108. Moltmann is drawing from Jewish mystic Isaac Luria's doctrine of *zimsum*.

arbitrary act of divine will, but a voluntary act of divine love that involves the self-limitation of God. Gunton finds this understanding flawed for two reasons: (1) space is part of creation and pre-creation omnipresence should not be thought of in the context of space and (2) a biblical understanding of kenosis is soteriological and not related to creation. In addition, Moltmann has this view because he believes that God cannot have a relationship with creation if he is external to it.<sup>130</sup> This does not fit the biblical account and is unnecessary because Moltmann can make his point adequately by seeing creation as an act of love by the one God, which is simultaneously self-limiting and a free expression.

This self-limitation is also seen in the Son in the incarnation where omnipotence is self limited, or as he terms it here self-humiliated.<sup>131</sup> The incarnation is impossible if the Son cannot self-humiliate. The passion and death complete the self-humiliation. This love-motivated self-humiliation by the God who is love seeks a response from creation that is love. However, creation cannot love as an expression of being and must have the freedom to choose. Humanity's freedom is the reason God self limits, because it provides the opportunity to love God by those who are not God. What Christ accomplishes as the self-limited God who became man displays his glory and power more greatly than at any other time.

### **Free response of humanity: love**

As a result of the self-limitation of God, creation offers a willing, responsive love to the Creator. This is not slavish obedience, but a loving choice made by God's children to join the Son and obey the command and the command is to love. Three problems are related to this thought. First, Moltmann has depicted the Son's love as an act of nature and not will; therefore

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<sup>130</sup> Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 141-142.

<sup>131</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 119.



there is not a direct connection between the Son's love and the love of the children who obey and love as an act of will. Second, God has determined that the human will eventually will give in to the irresistible grace. Third, the kingdom as depicted by Moltmann is a kingdom of freedom from authority. Obedience, even when voluntary, is still obedience to some authority.

The first two problems have been discussed; the third centers on Moltmann's understanding of freedom. He is most certainly not defining freedom as the freedom to do and be whatever people want to be provided they are not infringing on the freedom of others. Rather it is a freedom for fellowship with God, fellow human beings, and nature. This means freedom from anything or anyone who might hinder this fellowship as well as the resulting suffering such as poverty, hunger, contempt, and persecution. Any person or power that alienates or objectifies people restricts this freedom for fellowship and must be overcome.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, there is an authority in the kingdom; it is the authority of freedom for fellowship. In the kingdom, people are not freed from alienation so that they can become isolated individuals free to do whatever they want. Instead, they are the restoration of a humanity made in the image of God, who are not coerced, manipulated, legalized, or systematized into a community, but become a community because of the freedom for fellowship realized because of the forgiveness of the cross and the resurrection power of the Spirit. In this sense, the freedom of man and God's kingdom are not in opposition to one another, but are in fact the same.

### Summary

The belief in God as Trinity cannot be founded in metaphysical speculations if it is to have relevance to Christian theology and praxis. Metaphysics too often distances us from God rather than "freeing" God to dwell among us. The belief must instead be seen in the cross of

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<sup>132</sup> *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 17, 180, 261, 292.

Jesus Christ in which “God is reconciling himself . . . .” Theology must flow from the cross and not to it. When it does, God is seen in his glory. He is seen as love, and love is given a divine definition in human form – the laying down of one’s life for a friend. On the cross, the Lord has forever called us friend. However, the cross must not be seen in isolation but must be seen in conjunction with the resurrection. Together, these two events provide the hope that Christianity brings to the world: an accomplished forgiveness for the world and the certainty of the coming kingdom of God. The revelation of the crucified and resurrected God transforms the meaning of the kingdom. Rather than a king wielding power over his subjects, the kingdom is the liberation from all oppression and the freedom for fellowship. Freedom for fellowship is the authority in the kingdom. This is expressed best in the word “friendship” as opposed to “lordship”, and is not another authority than God because God is love. Until the full actualization of the kingdom, the church’s mission is to continue the mission of Christ by helping the poor and the oppressed and working against the oppressors so that freedom for fellowship can occur. The Trinity at once provides the model and the means (i.e., the cross) for the kingdom of God.

As appealing as Moltmann’s description of the kingdom might seem to some, the underlying tension between obedience/authority and equality/freedom creates several problems. First, if the kingdom involves being like Christ, who was a humble, obedient servant, how can the kingdom not be about obedience or being servile? The church must be obedient and servile in its role to help usher in the kingdom, but the church is not the kingdom and apparently this will no longer be necessary once the kingdom is fully realized.<sup>133</sup> Second, if human freedom is an integral part of the kingdom, how can participation in the kingdom be pre-determined for all? Presumably, we will not participate against our will, but because our will has been overpowered in our confrontation with the love of God. In a sense, we will be forced into the kingdom where

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<sup>133</sup> Moltmann gives the impression that the only one who will be eternally obedient is the Son.

there is no coercion, only freedom for loving fellowship. Third, once the tension is cut by the view that friendship replaces lordship in the kingdom, what basis is there for obedience to any authority and does that basis (love?)<sup>134</sup> then become lord? This preference of friendship over lordship is contrary to Scripture in which lordship is the basis of our friendship with God and therefore cannot be replaced.

The obedience of the Son plays a prominent role in the atonement. His death was voluntary and must be so that it could demonstrate the highest love (“Greater love has no man than ...”). However, it was an act of obedience to the Father. In the cry of forsakenness, obedience maintains the unity of the Father and the Son during the separation that occurs at least in the experience of the incarnate Son on the cross.<sup>135</sup> The perfect unity of their will even in the face of sin and death is the revelation that their unity cannot be broken and in fact breaks the power of sin and death. The church continues the mission of Christ to the oppressed as obedience to God. The response of humanity to the love of God is to join in the eternal obedience of the Son.

By focusing on perichoretic unity expressed in love, Moltmann must rely on the obedience of the Son as eternal. If Father and Son are both fully God and both are love, the distinction must be in the expression of their love – the Father as engendering and sending and the Son in being generated and going. In less metaphysical terms, the Son obeys the Father out of love. To maintain a Trinitarian understanding of God then, the obedience must be eternal.

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<sup>134</sup> Fiddes sees this as a possible consequence of Moltmann’s distinction between necessary love and free love. He sees that love or freedom could be an absolute anterior to God. (*Creative Suffering*, 73)

<sup>135</sup> Gerald O’ Collins does not interpret Moltmann as describing the separation merely in the experience of the Son but that the separation is a “rupture in the divine life”, which if correct is problematic. Namely, Moltmann confuses the inner divine life with the story of salvation to point that God needs historical processes to become Trinitarian. (“The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions”, *The Trinity: An International Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, [London: Oxford, 1999], 4-5) Pannenberg also sees Moltmann tying the consummation of Trinitarian to salvation history, but adds that this does not mean the Trinity finds its life in history, although it might appear that way to us. (330)

Within the context outlined in the preceding sections, Moltmann's understanding of the obedience of the Son to the Father will be examined more closely. The central question is the significance placed on the obedience of the Son both in terms of understanding the Trinity and the relevance of the Trinity for humanity.

### ETERNAL OBEDIENCE OF THE SON

In the New Testament, the relationship of the Father and the Son is central and not the metaphysical relationship of human and divine natures in Jesus. This is where Christology should begin, because "only a trinitarian concept of God makes it possible to understand God for Jesus' sake in his relationship as Father, and Jesus for God's sake as the child and Son of the Father."<sup>136</sup> One must begin with divine relations rather than a divine nature to remain consistent with the New Testament. While these relations can be described as perichoretic, the Father-Son relationship can also be described in terms of obedience.

Moltmann does not reject the metaphysical Christology developed by the patristics as false, but he does see it as too narrow and misleading.<sup>137</sup> The battle for the deity of the Son at Nicaea turns on Athanasius' correct connection of Christology (and ultimately Trinitarian theology) and soteriology. The man Jesus Christ must be God because of the kind of salvation, (deification) that he brought. Developing this insight of Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus writes that "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved."<sup>138</sup> While this does not preclude the cross as salvific, it can be and has been interpreted to make the incarnation the key soteriological event. Salvation had already taken place in the union of the divine and human natures. This leads to an over-emphasis on the deity

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<sup>136</sup> *Way of Christ*, 54.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>138</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101.

of Christ and his glory and a reduction of his lowly status. What resulted was seeing Jesus primarily as the apathetic and immutable God, which not coincidentally, was the theology needed by a Roman Empire in need of unification.<sup>139</sup> Produced by this misuse of metaphysics and used to support the “Christian” government, orthodoxy became too much a theology of glory to the neglect of the theology of the cross.

With the New Testament, the relationship of the Father and Son through the Spirit is the focus. The gospel throughout is the revelation of God as Trinity, and the revelation of the Trinity is first relationship and second person, because through the intimacy in their relationship the Father and Jesus “discover themselves” as “Abba” and “child”. This intimacy, later called perichoresis, is constitutive for both.<sup>140</sup> But mutual indwelling to this degree could itself become simple oneness if distinctions are not made. This distinction is seen in origins and obedience.

### **Obedience as Expression of Divine Love**

The Father eternally and from the necessity of his being loves the Son by engendering and bringing him forth. “In eternity and out of the very necessity of his being, the Son responds to the Father’s love through his obedience and surrender to the Father.”<sup>141</sup> Part of this eternal obedience is the cross in which the Son’s death is primarily obedience to the Father as the Son offers “his whole being through the Spirit”.<sup>142</sup> At first glance, this might appear to be a denial of the voluntary death of the Son if the obedience is indeed eternal and necessary. But, as stated earlier, Moltmann believes necessity and freedom coincide in God who is love, which while being necessary is yet a voluntary expression of the love that is not simply possessed by the Son,

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<sup>139</sup> *Way of Christ*, 51.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>141</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 58.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

but is who the Son is. In addition, this obedience is the way that the Son glorifies the Father.<sup>143</sup> In simple terms, the Son reveals the Father by revealing the Father's will through obedience.

This relationship is also understood in terms of the will, which Moltmann sees as the true *ὁμοούσιος*. In the godforsaken moment on the cross, the Son and Father are separated, yet remain one because of the community of their wills.<sup>144</sup> The Son is obeying the will of the Father because of his love for the Father and his Father's love for him. It is that obedience that unites them. This is the only way to truly understand the forsakenness the Son experiences on the cross. Metaphysical speculation regarding the two natures does not help, but obscures the revelation. "Here we have interpreted the event of the cross in trinitarian terms as an event concerned with a relationship between persons in which these persons constitute themselves in their relationship with each other."<sup>145</sup> It is this focus on the relationship, not substance or natures, that makes the will, and thus obedience, essential to understanding the cross.

The implications are connected to the central understanding that the Father also suffers on the cross, albeit in a different way. He does not experience the suffering of death, but of grief over the death of his Son. The cross is primarily an activity of the Trinity, and as such, the Son and Spirit who go into the world do not do so to bring God into history, but instead to bring history into God. The cross demonstrates that all of world history, the good and the bad, is taken up into God. It is an expression of love that goes out through the Spirit to the world facing the contradiction of freedom and does not suppress it, but overcomes it through suffering. By

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 124; *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 59.

<sup>144</sup> *Crucified God*, 244. Moltmann wants to understand the cross, especially the godforsaken moment, with regards to the Son, not a divine-human being. A two-nature understanding invariably leads to some form of docetism and hinders the Trinitarian action on the cross.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 245.

bringing the world into the inner life of the Trinity and through the experience of God's love for the godless, the world is changed.<sup>146</sup>

### **Revelation of the Cross Transforms Meaning**

All of this again is an attempt to understand God through the revelation of the cross, rather than to impose upon Christian theology a preconceived view of God.

When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God', the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.<sup>147</sup>

The revelation of the crucified God transforms human understanding of humiliation, self-surrender, helplessness, and humanity. In the context of the cross, these are not terms of derision or inferiority, but divine. Omnipotence that cannot be self-limited can only love that which is exactly like it. There can be no love for the other who is less than perfect, because that would require the possibility of suffering. "The man who experiences helplessness, a man who suffers because he loves, a man who can die, is therefore a richer being than an omnipotent God who cannot suffer, cannot love and cannot die."<sup>148</sup> In his self-surrender that led to the suffering anguish of the cross, Jesus Christ simultaneously reveals who God is to us and demonstrates his love for us. Atheism is a protest against the God of classical theism who is separate from suffering rather than the crucified God who enters into it and experiences it himself.

Looking again at Scripture, God in the Old Testament is seen as serving both in creating the world and serving Israel, even condescending to dwell for a while in a bush, the ark, and the temple. Serving also is depicted as divine. In the New Testament, God empties himself in the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 223.

incarnation and on the cross and creates the conditions in which God calls and we answer entering into a relationship. In that relationship, humanity experiences the pathos of God and has sympathy with him.

But in that God himself creates the conditions for communion with God through his self-humiliation in the death of the crucified Christ and through his exaltation of man in the resurrection of Christ, this community becomes a gracious, presuppositionless and universal community of God with amen in their common misery.<sup>149</sup>

This relationship of communion with God is impossible without the obedience of Jesus Christ.

### **Eternal Obedience is Eternal Subordination**

One of the key Scripture verses in understanding the eternal obedience of the Son is found in the return of the kingdom to the Father as indicated in 1 Cor. 15:28. Christ's rule prepares for God's rule when God will be all in all. Within the Trinity, the Father subjects everything to the Son and the Son subjects everything, including himself, to the Father. "Divine lordship is exercised within the divine Trinity."<sup>150</sup> This transfer of the kingdom from one divine subject to another prevents the Barthian error that still relied on the single subject and therefore was nothing more than a continuation of strict monotheism. It also refutes any notion that the whole person of Christ is somehow unnecessary.

The word used for subordination does not mean making superfluous, but obedience. The relationship of Jesus to his God and Father is described by Paul as Sonship in the formulae which denote surrender. The title 'Son' does not therefore concern a Godhead separated from the manhood of Christ, but the whole person of Christ who is delivered up, raised and given power to rule, in his relationship to the Father.<sup>151</sup>

This subordination is the consummation of the Sonship of the Son, the Fatherhood of the Father, and the brotherhood of believers. It does not result simply in the sole rule of God, but becomes

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 275. Cf. Ibid., 277.

<sup>150</sup> *Trinity and Kingdom*, 93.

<sup>151</sup> *Crucified God*, 265.



the ground for a new existence that is seen in its permanent form in suffering love.<sup>152</sup> The subordination of the Son to the Father is not just from eternity past or for the economy, but it marks the beginning of the completed eternal kingdom.

### **Obedience provides distinctions**

Maintaining the eternal obedience of the Son is essential to Moltmann's overall understanding of the immanent Trinity. Without it, no meaningful distinctions between the Persons can be made and thus little support for a social view of the Trinity. He is careful to avoid any sense of ontological subordination yet acknowledges the primacy of the Father in sending and directing and the subjection of the Son in going and obeying. This is consistent with the Greek Fathers' perspective, which Moltmann prefers, and does not simply rely on the processions, which he saw as being only constitutive. Moltmann also does not retreat to the economic-immanent Trinity distinction to describe the obedience of the Son that is so clearly expressed in Scripture. Instead there are no contradictions between the economic and immanent Trinity.<sup>153</sup>

If relationship instead of metaphysics is the focus of Trinitarian theology, in a divine community of equals the difficulty is in seeing significant distinctions between the equal Persons. If the Persons were all exactly the same and in perichoretic unity so as to be one, it would result in a rather convoluted way of expressing monotheism. Three separate gallons of water mixed together simply result in one three-gallon quantity of water. The Persons must either be different or different expressions of the same. Moltmann finds these expressions, and thus the distinctions, in relationships with love being central. This love is particular to the Person and the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 265, 266.

<sup>153</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 154, 170.

relationship, i.e., the communicating love of the Father and the responding love of the Son.<sup>154</sup>

Love is the condition for the unity and is what demonstrates particularity.

### **Significance of the Eternal Obedience of the Son**

The eternal obedience of the Son holds together the three unique and necessary doctrines of Christian theology, namely, the cross, the Trinity, and the authority of Scripture. If these three are to reveal the one true God, they cannot contradict one another. The Son's obedience alone makes this possible. Each of the four gospels records Jesus Christ as obedient to the Father, but John makes the case most extensively.<sup>155</sup> From a Trinitarian perspective, it should not be surprising that the gospel that begins with the most direct declaration of the deity of the Son ("the Word was God") should also have the strongest emphasis on the obedience of the Son to the Father. Jesus does the Father's work, speaks the Father's words, shares the Father's knowledge, and obeys the Father's will.<sup>156</sup> To explain the obedience so that it does not subordinate the Son to a lesser divinity than the Father, the church has appealed to distinctions between the natures of the human Jesus and the divine Son or economic and immanent Trinities. Moltmann recognizes that both of these metaphysical explanations can obscure more than they explain and can subordinate Scripture, treating it as a cruder form of the purer metaphysical expression. The work of Christ recorded in the narratives are viewed as illustrations rather than revelation and not even necessarily actual historical events. Scripture can only reveal God in a limited way by pointing toward a fuller revelation through metaphysics. Through this approach, the obedience of the Son can be reinterpreted as the obedience of the earthly Jesus alone without

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>155</sup> Numerous verses can be cited from the Synoptics. The most noteworthy are the prayer in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:41) and the Father's handing over of all things to the Son (Mt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22, 22:29).

<sup>156</sup> Works - Jn. 5:17-20, 10:25, 32; words - Jn. 12:50, 14:24; knowledge - Jn. 5:20, 8:28; will - Jn. 14:31.

any real significance except as an example to be followed or ignored altogether thereby missing the vital connection between the obedience of the Son, deity, and the atonement. However, if Scripture is taken at its word, John records repeatedly that the Son is obedient to the Father and gives no indication that this is a temporary relationship. As noted earlier, Moltmann sees the earthly obedience of the Son's correspondence with the eternal obedience of the Son as the evidence that we are dealing with the same God. In John 14:31, Jesus says, "... I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father." He is connecting obedience as an expression of his love, which is consistent with his teaching to his disciples in which he connects their obedience to him as an expression of their love for him (Jn. 15:10). Eternal love for the Father by the Son means eternal obedience by the Son to the Father.

Through obedience revealed as love and as divine, Scripture can maintain the three major Trinitarian concepts of unity, diversity, and equality. The obedience of love is the perfect aligning of one's will with another and demonstrates unity. With the added understanding of the mutual indwelling of the Father and Son, the unity can even more clearly be seen as oneness. However, Scripture portrays the two loving one another, but only the Son as obedient to the Father, never the reverse, thereby showing the revealed distinction in unity. United by a common love, the two are distinct because of the particular way that they express that love. The Father sends, and the Son goes. The Father commands, and the Son obeys. In the supreme obedience of the cross, there is no sense of coercion or fatalism in Scripture. Instead the gospel writers are quite emphatic that Jesus voluntarily laid down his life and that it was not taken from him. In John 10:18, he says: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received

from my Father.” Even in this context of Jesus asserting his voluntary death, he acknowledges that the authority he has is from the Father.

Moltmann has rightly identified the problem that resulted from the metaphysically based doctrines of the one substance or one subject behind the Trinity, because all ultimately lead to a strict monotheism expressed in various degrees of Trinitarian language. These views placed the distinction in terms of the processions with the Father being the origin, the Son the begotten, and the Spirit generated, but they all led back to the one substance or the one subject. With the social doctrine of the Trinity, Moltmann views the processions as only constitutive but that leaves him with no meaningful distinctions in the inner life of the Trinity other than the commands of the Father and the obedience of the Son. By beginning with the Three Persons and placing the unity in relationship, the relationship demonstrates the particularities of the equal, yet distinct Persons.

The relationship of the Father and the Son as eternal and necessary creates the relationship of God to humanity as free. Moltmann believes the God who loves as an expression of the divine nature is superior to creation that must choose to love. A perfect being who is love and loves perfectly is better than those who are imperfect and must learn to love. The eternal obedience of the Son is his perfect expression of love to his Father and thus is central to Moltmann’s concept of God. Because the cross is the display of both the love of the Father and the Son, there can be no cross and no justification from the cross without the obedience. Without the obedience of the Son, there is no crucified God, only another crucified man, there is not Trinity and perhaps no God at all, and there is no hope. The hope and the promise of the kingdom depends upon the eternal obedience of the Son.

## CONCLUSION

Because the cross is the supreme obedience of the Son, this obedience must also be at the center of theology. Because this obedience is an expression of the Son's love for the Father, love too is at the center of theology. Without Jesus Christ's obedient sacrifice of love for his Father, there is no resurrection, no new life in Christ, and no future kingdom of God in the world. If theology is done from the approach that Moltmann takes, this obedience of the Son must be eternal. If not, the one substance or subject overrides any distinctions leaving a strict monotheism expressed in Trinitarian language. Other than being retained as an empty shrine of orthodoxy, Trinitarian language and thus the Trinity can itself eventually be left behind as a revered relic of the past with no relevance for today. The cross then can no longer be a full revelation of God himself providing redemption for all creation.

One of the major weaknesses in Moltmann's approach is that he is unwilling to accept the implications of the eternal obedience of the Son with regards to humanity's relationship to God. The underlying binary and resulting tension that he sets up (obedience/authority-equality/freedom) prevents him from doing so. The kingdom is about the establishment of the equality and freedom of all humanity, and there is no place for obedience and authority. At points in his writings, he retains the word "obedience" in the relationship between God and humanity, always keeping it in the context of love. Love is the command; obedience is to love. For the Son, obedience is an expression of his being; for humanity it is not so and for it to be love it must be free. In subsequent writings, the word is used primarily to refer to the Son with much more emphasis on the freedom and liberty of humanity. The defining word for the God-humanity relationship is friend and with friends, partnership, not lordship, is the key understanding of the relationship. The impression is that the only one who the Father has

authority over is the obedient Son, which is an expression of the divine love between the Father and Son. Humanity is free to relate to God in love, but this love does not necessarily result in obedience. In fact, it can result in giving God counsel and in some respects directing him.<sup>157</sup>

The kingdom is one in which all will be full, free, and equal participants. The opponent of the kingdom is anything or anyone who would marginalize, enslave, or objectify others. In human history, authoritarianism in whatever form or spirit has been at the heart of much of the opposition to the kingdom causing much suffering in the world. Because authoritarian power structures often legitimize their rule by appealing to what they see as a parallel in the lordship of God, removing the understanding of lordship from God is important to de-legitimizing these structures. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Scripture provides no support for removing lordship or redefining it so that it has no sense of authority. While friendship is important for a proper understanding of divine lordship, it was not meant to supplant lordship and did not do so in the New Testament or the early church. Jesus' statement about friendship in John 15 was clearly related to knowledge, and obedience to his authority was the condition of the friendship. Similarly, the lordship of Jesus is one of the major emphases of the New Testament, and "Jesus is Lord" is the summarized confession for believers.

This push toward a lord-free kingdom is not just unscriptural, but also unnecessary. Moltmann rightly wants the revelation to interpret human terms rather than allowing terms to define the revelation and who God is. Rather than replacing lordship, the revelation places lordship in its proper context. In so doing, just as with obedience, lordship does not have to be a negative, oppressive force. It seems that Moltmann could have developed this understanding and discussed the conditions under which authority is needed and positive.

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<sup>157</sup> As stated earlier, Moltmann also uses "lordship" and "rule" with similar ambiguity.

At times, Moltmann makes a distinction between worldly lordship and divine lordship (just as he sees human obedience in the obedience of the Son) but he does not maximize the contributions this distinction can make. Divine lordship must always be kept in the context of divine love as seen in the relationship of the Father and the Son. Here love is given and received freely person to person without coercion but in the unity of will and for the common good and the glory of the other. The same love is expressed to the other according to the particularity of the person. One could argue that this puts a friendly face on authoritarianism, because those in power could claim to hold a position analogous to the Father. This fails for a couple of reasons. First, there is no other unoriginate, origin than the Father, and therefore there is no one who can love or lead the way the Father does. The expression of his love is tied to his Person. Second, the love of the Father is suffering love that seeks the sinners and the lost and stands for liberty and justice. This love cannot be oppressive.

The particularity of humanity's love for God must then be with the obedient love of the Son. But if the perfect love of the Son comes from who he is, humanity cannot love this way unless there is a transformation that allows love to flow from who we are. Jesus commands his followers to love, but true love cannot be commanded. This requires, as the New Testament teaches, that there must be a supernatural transformation of believers through faith in Jesus Christ so that through the indwelling of the Spirit obedient love becomes an expression of who they have become.<sup>158</sup> Improving the tragic situations of the poor and oppressed does not necessarily improve the poor and oppressed as people. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10), a love that both rich and poor can have. It is not a changed situation that is needed, but transformed lives. This is why the lordship

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<sup>158</sup> Moltmann believes this transformation is inevitable and universal. This is an example of Moltmann using his eschatological hermeneutic in such a way as to be selective in the Scripture he uses while ignoring Scripture that does not have such determinism and inclusiveness.

of God cannot be set aside even though it has been distorted and misused to oppress. Only when Jesus is confessed as Lord are people transformed (Rom. 10:8-10) so that they can love as God loves (1 Jn. 4:7-8), whether they are rulers or ruled. They can view each other as equals and love one another accordingly.<sup>159</sup> In the context of divine love, lordship of God is not to be feared but embraced as the Creator lovingly relates to his creation.

Moltmann is correct in addressing the problem of oppressive authoritarian structures, but authoritarian structures are not necessarily oppressive as he seems to indicate. All communities must be based in authority, but equality of members of the community is not based on equal authority. In the Trinity, this is evident. Authority reveals diversity and refers to roles. The abuse of authoritarianism, which Moltmann rightly sees emerging from a flawed understanding of God, comes from the failure to recognize two distinctions between divine and human communities, namely perfect love and eternity. The perfect love of the Father, Son, and Spirit creates the context under which authority is not abusive, even an authority that would send the Son to suffer and die. This love is selfless both within the Trinity and from the Trinity to the rest of creation. Perfect love enables each Person to fulfill his role and to allow the others to do the same. There is a perfect aligning of wills among those who are perfect. Love to this degree does not exist among human beings. Secondly, this relationship of perfect love in the Trinity has always been so. There is no becoming for the immanent Trinity. Human relationships are constantly changing, because the people involved are constantly changing. By acknowledging no one comes close to loving perfectly and permanently as God and that the ones who show even traces of this love do so only through God's power, the community should recognize the interdependence on one another without abandoning a dependence on God. No one member should be seen as the

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<sup>159</sup> This appears to be the general principle behind life in the body of Christ and the household codes. (See for example Eph. 5:21-6:9.)



embodiment of God; rather the embodiment of God is the community of faith, the body of Christ. God is not simply indwelling the individual or the community but is in the relationships. However, because there are varying levels of understanding and expressing this love, there must be authority within the community, but a humble authority that acknowledges that no one has even neared perfection and that all simultaneously have authority and are under authority.

Despite some of the difficulties with his theology and interpretation of Scripture, Moltmann provides an important criticism of classical theism and advancement in the understanding of God by beginning with the revelation of the crucified God. His emphasis on Christian hope is also important in helping the church understand its prophetic, redeeming role in society and in empowering the oppressed to find freedom. At the center of it all is the cross of Jesus Christ and the obedience offered there to his Father.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

### SUBORDINATION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

This study began by looking at the use of the term “subordination” in Trinitarian theology to attempt to ascertain if there is appropriate usage of this word that is consistent with Scripture and the orthodoxy developed in the first four centuries of church history. From the New Testament writings forward, the church affirmed both the deity of the Son and in some sense his subordination to the Father. The church in each era faced different external and internal factors, yet in every situation while believing steadfastly in one God, they rejected any teaching against the deity of the Son and they distinguished the Father from the Son in a way that subordinated the Son. The Apostolic Fathers do not develop how this could be, but their affirmation of it can be seen particularly in the writings of Ignatius, who referred to Jesus Christ as God and being sent by and subject to the Father. Through a Logos Christology, the Apologists distinguish Christian theology from polytheism by affirming the oneness of the Father and the Son and steer away from various Gnostic conclusions by affirming that the Son is from the Father’s substance. With the rise of modalistic monarchianism, Tertullian sought to emphasize both the distinctions and the unity of God in his being by introducing the understanding of one divine substance with three aspects that are revealed in the economy as three *personae*.<sup>1</sup> Here the Father is understood to be the transcendent source, who has his Word and Spirit eternally with him, and the Son as the Word sent from the Father. Origen contributes the understanding of the eternal generation of the Son, which was at least implicit in the thought of many of his predecessors. The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son helps secure the eternity of the Son (not just the Word) and the

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<sup>1</sup> Rusch, 10.

unity of the Son and the Father. But Origen also details the distinction of the Son from the Father and in so doing can be interpreted as teaching that the Son is inferior ontologically to the Father.

One of the main reasons that these early church fathers used language that subordinated the Son to the Father is because that is the language of Scripture, which focuses much more on the divine Persons in the economy than in an inner divine life. The fathers also do not take issue with the overall positive attitude that Scripture has regarding subordination in the sense of authority and obedience. Part of this could be explained because these fathers focused on the economic Trinity (again largely because this is the focus of Scripture). However, from what they did write about the immanent Trinity, one cannot see them even considering the possibility that the Father was aligning his will with the Son's. It is always the other way. Likewise with Origen who sees the Father-Son relationship as eternal, it is always the Father who sends and the Son who goes. The generating-generated, sending-going, and authority-obedience distinctions between the Father-Son are scriptural and, in the context of Scripture and the minds of these writers, denote subordination, but not subordinationism. If one believes in the divine monarchy, any distinction in the Godhead involves some sense of subordination.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, these distinctions are crucial to Christian soteriology. Amid the external persecution and the internal polemics, these early church fathers could have adopted a pluralistic attitude, especially during the centuries when the church was the vulnerable minority. However, they were not interested in an acceptable theology to place alongside others in the world. Rather they were trying to understand and explain the only conception of God that could express the only way of salvation that they read in Scripture and were experiencing in their lives. Their concern was not only to describe the Christian God in a reasonable way, but also to argue that only the Christian God could provide salvation for the individual person and more importantly

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<sup>2</sup> Archibald Robertson, *NPNF*, vol. 4, xxiii-xxiv.

the world. In general, the Father was viewed as the transcendent source of all but could not be known (at least in a salvific sense) because of the limitations of humanity. The Son was from the Father as the only full revelation of the Father to humanity. Through the revelation of the Son, salvation could occur. This understanding of the relationship of the Father and the Son indicates some sense of subordination at least in the economy. This subordination demonstrated the soteriological necessity of at least an economic Trinity. As mentioned earlier, although these theologians were writing primarily about the Trinity in the economy, their understanding of the eternal multiplicity in God (whether it be God-Logos-Spirit or Father-Son-Spirit) combined with the view of the Father as the first cause could only mean that the distinctions seen in the economy paralleled the distinctions in the immanent Godhead (i.e., the Father cannot be sent by the Son/Logos or Spirit). Only a Triune God could maintain the Creator/creature distinction (transcendence) and be the mediator (immanence) and thus accomplish God's creation/redemptive purpose and provide our salvation.<sup>3</sup> Although their language at times could be interpreted as teaching that the Son was a lesser deity than the Father, this seems hardly to be what they believed because this is precisely one of the main beliefs that they were opposing.

This becomes more evident in the Arian controversy, which brought both focus to and a shift in the theological development of the doctrine of the Trinity. The orthodoxy of the third century was directed largely against modalism, which resulted in attempts to articulate the distinctions in the immanent Trinity. Arius and those who would follow his lead did not think the church had gone far enough in the distinctions. Still retaining the fundamental belief in God as the first cause, the Arians rejected the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son (and thus

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<sup>3</sup> As the main heresy faced during the latter part of this period, modalistic monarchianism contradicted the biblical data and left open the possibility that there could be more than three modes of God. This view could actually encourage multiple interpretations if God is thought to be manifest in other extra-biblical modes. The belief in the Father as the first cause and the Logos/Son and Spirit as eternally proceeding does not contradict the biblical data and excludes modalism.

God as eternal Father) and of the Son as coming from the substance of the Father. In so doing, the Arians pushed the distinctions so far that they severed the relationship between the οὐσία of the Father and the Son thereby rejecting any sense of modalism. What was lost was a soteriology that included salvation as accomplished by God alone. As discussed in chapter 2, Arian soteriology, according to Gregg and Groh, was based on Christ providing an example for humanity to follow. While the Arians affirmed the uniqueness of the Son, he was not necessarily unique and other intermediaries might have been able to provide the example that he did. Through their worship of the Son who was divine but not God, they also introduced polytheism.

The rejection of Arianism is a clear denunciation of any theology that makes the Son a lesser deity than the Father. At Nicaea, the Son is declared to be eternal and from the substance of the Father. Arian soteriology is also rejected indirectly. If the Son is deity who becomes incarnate, he can still provide an example, but his example cannot be the primary source of our salvation. The orthodox position had made salvation the sole act of God and based on knowing God, which only came through the mediation of the Son and was experienced through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Without rejecting this position, Athanasius shifts the focus toward understanding salvation as the deification of human nature accomplished through the incarnation in which the divine and human natures were united. Although the life and death of Christ continue to be significant in deifying all of what it means to be human, much of what needed to be accomplished had been accomplished in the incarnation. Unlike Athanasius' soteriology in which God is solely responsible for our salvation, the Arian view placed the responsibility more in human hands. In Athanasius' theology, the Triune God remains soteriologically necessary as does the uniqueness of the Son. Good works are a result (and not the cause) of the salvation provided by the Trinity.

After Nicaea, Arianism became an even greater threat to the church with deft use of Scripture and the support of the politically powerful being their greatest strengths. The Arians interpreted any Scripture that indicated subordination of any kind as proving that the Bible teaches that the Son is a lesser being than the Father. As shown in chapter 2, the Bible does not connect subordination in the sense of authority and obedience with ontological inferiority. Nevertheless, the Cappadocians to some extent accept certain elements of this Arian position. For example, Gregory of Nazianzus does not believe that obedience is appropriate to divinity and provides rather strained interpretations of passages such as John 6:38 and 1 Cor. 15:27-28. Upon closer examination, the Cappadocians' objection seems to be based on protecting the free will of the Son. What they are arguing against is the Son being understood as having no will and thus not a person or his obeying as a slave or one coerced and thus not omnipotent. Even their fundamental Trinitarian formula of all things coming from the Father, through the Son, and perfected by the Spirit was under attack as teaching a difference in essence, which led the Cappadocians to allow some variation even here. Gregory of Nazianzus believed the understanding of the Father as the source of being established the equality of the Persons, yet he was reluctant to emphasize this point for fear that his opponents would interpret it to mean the Son and Spirit were inferior beings.<sup>4</sup>

In defense of the doctrine of the Trinity against subordinationsim, Augustine emphasizes how the unity of the immanent Trinity is seen in the economic Trinity. He categorizes Scripture as referring to the divinity of the Son, the humanity of the Son, or the incarnation. He still holds to the understanding of the Father as the source of all things, but his focus is much more on the unity and cooperation of the Three Persons. In so doing, Augustine does not eliminate the distinctions, but he seems to minimize their significance.

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<sup>4</sup> *Oration* 40, 43.

Of the post-Nicene fathers, Hilary of Poitiers is the one who seems best at holding together the theological development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the scriptural witness. Like the Eastern fathers, Hilary seeks to understand the only God who could effect salvation. He adopts the soteriological significance of human knowledge of God and the union of the divine and human natures. He believes that human will plays a role in salvation; people must choose to accept this divine gift. But this is a choice based on faith, not knowledge or reason. In this way, Hilary brings in the importance of the life of Christ and the cross in that Christ not only paid the penalty for humanity's sin, but also gives people assurance that he was indeed the God-man and that his death removed the world's condemnation and overcame death. The obedience of the Son is crucial to the atonement. In addition, Hilary does not accept the Arian belief that obedience means ontological inferiority. In fact, he argues quite the opposite. The Father's sending and commanding and the Son's going and executing are distinctions of Person, not nature. Evidence of the Son's omnipotence is that he can align his will perfectly with the Father's and carry out that will perfectly. "Unlimited power of expression" combined with "unlimited power of execution" is the power of the true nature of God. Similarly, the incarnation is a demonstration of the Son's omnipotence. Because he does not agree that obedience connotes inferiority, he is also able to see subordination even in the names Father and Son. However, this subordination is assigned to the Persons of the Father and Son and not their divine nature. Like the Cappadocians, Hilary does not want the obedience of the Son to be coerced. Rather, he specifies that this is a willing obedience.

From this look at subordination in the New Testament and during the development of Trinitarian theology, a few observations can be made. The subordination of the Son seems to hinge on whether the Father is the fountainhead of all being, the ingenerate generate, or whether

this is more appropriately assigned to the Godhead. If the Father as the source of all being is the main distinction, there will always be at least some sense of subordination. If this distinction is pressed too far or if this is assigned to the divine nature, subordinationism is inevitable. The doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and his being *ὁμοούσιος* with the Father are crucial to prevent subordinationism. However, they both simultaneously affirm the equality of the Son, his distinction from the Father, and the priority of the Father.

Hilary, in particular, sees that obedience is a matter of the will, and the will is personal and relational. Therefore, obedience and authority are personal and relational. Subordination in the sense of obedience to an authority is not necessarily a sign of inferiority and is not presented in the Bible negatively. Rather, the Bible portrays obedience positively as love.

### **P. T. FORSYTH AND JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN**

Both P. T. Forsyth and Jürgen Moltmann see the equality of the Father and the Son and the eternal obedience of the Son to the Father. Similar to Hilary, they do not see obedience as indicating ontological inferiority.<sup>5</sup> Although they are separated by more than half a century, these two theologians have a number of similarities in their approach to theology that contribute to this similar view of the relationship of the Father and the Son. Both are deeply influenced by Reformed theology and accept the sovereign grace of God as his judgment on the world. Redemption is the exclusive work of God and there can be no necessary contribution from any other individual or group. From a high view of Scripture<sup>6</sup>, they want to begin with what has been revealed and to allow the revelation to create the context and define relevant terms. The revelation is centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which means their theologies are

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<sup>5</sup> Neither Forsyth nor Moltmann seem to be drawing significantly on Hilary's theology.

<sup>6</sup> Both accept the contributions of the historical-critical method, but with some caution.



not only Christo-centric, but also crucio-centric. They also draw deeply from the patristics and other major theologians in the church, but not uncritically. Neither is satisfied with the major traditional atonement theories and both see the obedience of the Son as crucial to providing a better understanding.

The theologies of Forsyth and Moltmann are intended to address the needs of people, especially those who are hurting. As such, their theologies are also eschatologically oriented and pragmatic. The redemption of the world is their common focus, both believing that the crucial point in history was the cross in which God's judgment of grace was proclaimed. But neither one believes humanity is evolving into the kingdom, seeing the process instead to be one of conflict and crisis. While not evolving, the coming kingdom must have relevance in the world today and not simply be a distant hope. In addition, the cross represented the finished work of Christ for the redemption of the entire world, and there is no salvation that does not include all of creation. The church is not the kingdom, yet with an important role in helping to usher in the kingdom.

There are also significant differences between the two. Moltmann's theology is more explicitly Trinitarian and eschatologically focused. Despite significantly fewer explicit references to the Trinity, Forsyth understands certain key elements of a social doctrine of the Trinity, a view that seems to follow more from an approach that takes the cross as the starting point for theology. Moltmann also begins at the cross and develops a much more detailed social doctrine of the Trinity. Forsyth emphasizes much more than Moltmann the significance of personal faith and the church. Although he sees the danger of over-emphasizing individual salvation, he nevertheless believes it is important. He also sees the church as crucial to the advent of the kingdom and believes the unity of the church is vitally important to fulfilling this task.

For this study, the most important similarities between Forsyth and Moltmann have to do

with their subordination of a metaphysical understanding of God to a moral understanding and their belief in the eternal obedience of the Son. The metaphysical explanation has value, but it also obscures as much as it explains. It also moves the focus from the work of Christ (the focus of the New Testament) to the incarnation. To understand the Christian conception of God, one must follow the path of the full revelation of God that began with the historic event of Jesus Christ and was never more completely manifest than in his death and resurrection. Over-emphasis on the incarnation leads to an inadequate soteriology that too easily identifies human progress as divine activity. Both theologians had seen how this view had left the church with a shallow theology that could not address the deep suffering and evil that plagued the world. Metaphysical theology is important, but it must emerge from the revelation rather than be imposed upon it. Scripture must not be seen as a cruder form of the more sophisticated metaphysical explanation. Rather, Scripture should be the authority by which metaphysics is judged.

By subordinating metaphysics to exegesis, both theologians were able to describe the unity and diversity in God using the Bible as the primary source and without relying on an abstract impersonal ontology of substance. What they see in the biblical data is love, first and foremost love between the Father and the Son. To use Moltmann's terminology, there is the engendering love of the Father and the responding love of the Son. The love that the Father and the Son have is the same love, but their expression of it is particular to who they are and to the relationship that they have. This parallels the distinction between substance and Person, but neither theologian appears to be thinking in these terms. Rather, the focus is on the relationship between the Father and the Son. This is not an innovation, because it had been seen centuries earlier in the Cappadocian understanding of Father as the name of the relation between the

Father and Son and not the name of an essence or an action.

One could argue that this places necessity upon God, the necessity of love. But our theologians would respond that this is simply God being God. God is love, and so God loves. Nature and freedom coincide in love. Nothing could be more absurd than to think that the God who is love can choose to hate. Although all creation can trust that God is love and loves, God is free to express this love according to his purposes that might not always be clear to us.

There are several potential advantages to preferring love over metaphysical substance as the primary basis for the unity and diversity in God. First of all, this is the predominant way that the Bible depicts the relationship between the Father and the Son. This is the Father who calls his Son beloved and the Son who obeys his Father as a demonstration of his love for his Father. Secondly, love is constant within God himself and in the divine economy. When John writes that “God is love”, he means that God is eternally love. The economic manifestation of that love is a continuation of the eternal love. Both the sending of the Son and the death of Christ are presented in the New Testament as the key evidence of God’s love for the world. In addition, Jesus said that the Father had loved him since “before the foundation of the world.” (Jn. 17:24) And unless one accepts the Arian assertion of a time before the time of creation, Jesus is referring to the eternal love of the Father for the Son. Third, substance can lead to an impersonal view of God. Love can lead to viewing God as an ambiguous feeling that can be subjectively defined. However, this does not have to be the case if one accepts the authority of Scripture, because the Bible defines the love of God and provides the context for understanding it. Forsyth’s favorite phrase “holy love” is a constant reminder that this love is divine and not human and should be interpreted in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. Understood biblically, if God is love, he must be personal and his objectives must be relational.

But can love be the basis for a unity in which the Three Persons are one God? While a full answer is beyond the scope of this study, some preliminary thoughts can be given. First, the statement “God is love” seems to be more than just one of many descriptors of God. It concerns his fundamental nature, his very essence. In the context of that statement, John also indicates that God is the source of love and to be born of God is to love. Second, both Forsyth and Moltmann appeal to the concept of perichoresis to help explain the unifying effect of love. Moltmann, who develops this much more extensively than Forsyth, sees perichoretic love as showing both the unity and distinctions in the Godhead.

If love is seen as providing the basis for the unity and distinctions in the Godhead, there must be some sense of obedience because the Bible, including the words of Jesus himself, makes a direct connection between love and obedience. This connection concerns the love that we have for God and the love that the Son has for the Father. In addition, Jesus states that his keeping of the Father’s commandments is a sign of abiding in the Father’s love. (Jn. 15:10) While some of the church fathers attributed this obedience to the humanity of Jesus, this seemed to be as a refutation of an Arian argument drawn from a misinterpretation of Scripture. As previously discussed, the Bible has a positive view of obedience and does not teach that it is a sign of inferiority.

Both Forsyth and Moltmann hold to the eternal obedience of the Son, and both see this obedience as important to the atonement, albeit with different emphases. For Moltmann, the key moment in the crucifixion narrative is the cry of forsakenness in which the Son experiences separation from the Father. Throughout this experience, the Son remains united with the Father because in love he remains obedient despite the experienced forsakenness. This is important to Moltmann’s overall theology, because it is the climax of God’s entering into our suffering, which

he will overcome through the resurrection. Forsyth has a larger role seeing the obedience of the Son as what is required for the atonement. The cross is not punitive, but it is the supreme example of the Son's obedience through which he confesses the holiness of the Father by accepting the Father's judgment. In Forsyth's words, "holiness answers holiness."

Because the Son's obedience is necessary for the atonement in both Moltmann and Forsyth's theology, this obedience must be eternal if the atonement is the exclusive act of an independent God. The atonement is the free act of grace by the sovereign God, and if obedience is necessary to the atonement, it must be the obedience of God. The inadequacies of an anthropocentric theology had already been revealed in Forsyth's time and are even more evident today. If there is to be hope for the coming kingdom of God amid the evil and suffering in this world, this hope must be grounded in the certainty that the redemption of the world is in God's hands, not humanity's.

Although both theologians affirm the eternal obedience of the Son, only Forsyth is willing to accept the implications that this has for the relationship of God to humanity and human beings to each other. Moltmann has identified authoritarianism as the source of the systemic suffering in the world, and this source must be eliminated. Through a rather suspect use of Scripture, Moltmann replaces lordship with friendship as the way that God wants to relate humanity. For Moltmann, friendship means a community of equals.<sup>7</sup> Forsyth views human obedience to divine authority as having continuing significance, particularly in the personal faith in Jesus as Lord through which the personal obedience of the Son is reproduced in the believer. He then connects how the new nature is the basis for freedom and equality. Just as nature and freedom coincide in God being God, so too we obey and love in freedom because our new nature

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<sup>7</sup> Moltmann is doing this to protect the freedom of humanity, but his belief in the inevitability of all people being in the kingdom takes away this freedom.

in Christ creates the conditions for it. In Christ, we love freely because our nature is to love.

In summary, Forsyth and Moltmann agree with the scriptural position that obedience does not necessarily mean inferiority. They also affirm the obedience of the Son to the Father and find this obedience to be necessary for the atonement if the atonement is to be the exclusive act of God. The atonement as the act of God ensures the freedom and grace of God. Because it is the free and gracious act of God, it will have its intended effect. The obedience of the Son cannot be attributed to the assumed humanity but must be divine.<sup>8</sup> However, for this obedience to be understood properly, it must be understood as the obedience of love in response to the engendering love of the Father and it must in no way communicate an inferiority of being. The immanent Trinity should be understood primarily in terms of love and obedience. A metaphysical understanding of the Father-Son relationship is still acceptable, but it should be secondary to and informed by the biblical witness to the mutual love that exists between them.

### IMPLICATIONS

This study has looked at “subordination” and related terms to see how they are presented in the Bible, how the church understood these terms particularly during the development of Trinitarian thought, and how Forsyth and Moltmann understood and used these terms. The conclusion is twofold. First, that if one approaches Christian theology beginning with the Bible as the authoritative record of the full revelation God in the person and work of Christ (which means the subordination of metaphysics because the Bible does not reveal God primarily in metaphysical terms), the subordination of the Son to the Father in the sense of his obedience is inescapable. This is because the Bible presents the relationship in terms of love and distinguishes

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<sup>8</sup> They are not alone in this position. Gunton lists Basil, John Calvin, and Barth as viewing humility as divine. (*Promise*, xxvi-xxvii) Gunton sees a parallel between economic subordination and the subordination of taxis in the immanent Trinity, but sees the obedience of the Son as economic and not eternal. (197, 198)

the Father and Son in how they love. In addition, the Bible presents obedience as crucial to the atonement and if the atonement is to be the sovereign act of God the obedience must be divine. This can be viewed as an economic subordination, but this is not the only possible understanding nor is it necessary to limit it this way. To do so, one must accept the Arian presupposition that there is a time before time when the immanent Trinity transitioned to the economic Trinity in which the Son became the agent of the Father in creation. One could follow Augustine and attribute the subordination of the Son to the human nature or the Incarnation, but this does not explain the pre-incarnation obedience of the Son expressed in the “sending” language of Scripture. There is sufficient biblical support for the Father as uniquely the ingenerate source or the sender, and this indicates a meaningful distinction that communicates some understanding of subordination that is eternal.

Opposition to the eternal obedience of the Son comes in part from the acceptance of two other Arian presuppositions: (1) eternal characteristics or attributes are essential or substantial and (2) subordination means ontological inferiority. Neither of these presuppositions appears true to the biblical witness. In addition, Athanasius argued that the Father is eternally the Father of the eternally generated Son. If the first presupposition is correct, he would be arguing that the Son is from a different essence. If Athanasius is wrong, one must either retreat to Origen’s argument for the eternal generation of the Son (and the belief in the eternity of matter) or drop the doctrine altogether. Without this doctrine, there can be no Trinitarian doctrine consistent with Scripture, because the doctrine of eternal generation ensures both the deity of the Son and the distinction between the Father and the Son. It does not follow that because the generation or the obedience of the Son is eternal that this indicates he is of a different, and presumably inferior, substance than the Father. Secondly, as already discussed, the Bible does not present

subordination in the sense of obedience as signifying inferiority. On the contrary, obedience is interpreted as crucial to fulfilling God's mission in this world. The event of the cross is the lasting testimony to this, for here we find (to use John's language) Christ glorified in what the world considers lowly. Theologians should be careful not to degrade what God exalts.

Subordination as obedience to an authority is depicted in Scripture as a matter of the will and relationship and not a matter of ontology. The patristics and our contemporary theologians insist that Jesus goes to the cross voluntarily, yet in obedience to the Father. This is consistent with the biblical witness. What is also consistent with these theologians and the Bible is the context in which the obedience must be understood. All agree that the eternal obedience of the Son must be understood as a response to the engendering divine love of the Father. What follows are some of the implications of subordination in the context of divine love.

1. The love the Father and Son have is the same, but their expressions of it are particular to their Person. As stated above, love provides the basis for the unity and the distinctions in the Godhead without reliance on a metaphysical explanation.

2. If the economic relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit is presented in terms of love and will, it would seem that the immanent relationship should also be viewed as one of love and will first and substance second.

3. The nature of God is to love, but he is free to express that love according to his purposes. This does more than secure divine freedom. It also maintains the necessity of faith and personal relationship with God because although we can be assured that God will love, we cannot assume that we always know how he will love. The need to know him and trust him is especially great when the expression of his love is difficult to discern or when the suffering in life makes it appear that he does not love.



4. If God is love, he is revealed when we love with the love that comes from him.

The great “love chapter” of 1<sup>st</sup> John is chapter four. The evidence that we are born of God, know God, abide in him, and are indwelt by him is the love that we have for one another. Brought together here are the soteriological emphases of the ante-Nicene fathers (i.e., knowing God), Athanasius (i.e., a new nature), and Augustine (i.e., love). John affirms the sovereign act of God (“We love because he first loved us”, v. 19) and the necessity of faith (“Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God”, v. 15). To receive the benefits that God alone makes possible and offers to us, we must accept this gift in faith and then we are born of God.

5. God is revealed in our relationships when they are founded in and are an expression of the divine love that we receive from him.

6. Divine love is not super-human love, but the love defined in the revelation of God. This unconditional love is from God and is an expression of faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 5:6). It is also a love that will necessarily express itself. Divine love should transform us and our understanding of love.

7. Subordination must be consistent with the divine love of the revelation and as recorded in Scripture. This means that if authority and obedience are to be properly exercised, they must be so as expressions of divine love in which there is respect for the freedom of the other. Thus, there is no coercion or manipulation, only love that allows the other to love as an expression of his or her will.

If love is what unifies and distinguishes the Persons of the Trinity, there is nothing in Scripture that precludes the doctrine of the eternal obedience of the Son from being true. Love and obedience should not be set in opposition to one another, as Moltmann at times does. When

metaphysical arguments are used, they should be informed by the doctrine of the Trinity rather than shaping it. Therefore if love as defined in Scripture involves the will, that is if it is between persons and it unifies and distinguishes the divine Persons, this should provide the context for any metaphysical understanding of God. This use of love seems to be more consistent with what is found in the Bible and keeps the cross as the exclusive act of God without losing the distinctions.

### **Complementarian-egalitarian debate**

The current study does not provide the answer that will resolve the debate between complementarians and egalitarians, but perhaps it might offer some insights that could help guide future discussion. These will be offered here.

1. The first point is exegetical. Both sides have a common approach to biblical interpretation that includes this principle: as much as possible, one must begin with authorial intent regarding what a passage of Scripture means. It seems rather clear that Paul did not have a full Trinitarian theology in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 11:3 and there should be some caution in reading this into the text. There is obviously some sense of subordination in the clause “... the head of Christ is God”,<sup>9</sup> but with respects to what Paul intends to communicate, it is irrelevant whether this statement is referring to the economic or immanent relationship of the Father and Son.

2. That which is eternal is not necessarily essential. This is a key argument used by

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<sup>9</sup> As discussed in chapter 2, Grudem has already discussed that κεφαλὴ should not be understood as source. Even if it were, if understood in a relational way rather than a metaphysical one, there would still be some sense of subordination. In addition, verse 12 seems to preclude “source” as a possible meaning for κεφαλὴ. After speaking of the mutual dependency husband and wife have, Paul indicates that all things are from God, woman is made from man, but now man is from woman. If his point in verse three was in reference to source, it would seem that he would have clarified here where man and woman are described as the “source” of the other.

the egalitarians. As discussed, Athanasius believes the Father is eternal and if this means that the Father is the divine essence then it is a different essence than that of the Son and Spirit.

Categorizing all that is eternal as essential is a key Arian argument. If it is accepted, there must either be a rejection of the eternality of the Father, a return to Origen's understanding of the eternality of matter, and/or the loss of distinctions among the Trinitarian Persons.

3. The biblical understanding of obedience should be re-examined to prevent a non-biblical attitude from prevailing and to see what conditions are necessary so that authority-obedience does not result in oppression or anything else less than God's design. This also means understanding what in the relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit can and cannot be reflected in human relationships and what transformational steps or processes are required

4. The Persons of the Trinity must be distinguished from one another in a meaningful way that is consistent with the biblical data. The loss of meaningful or perceivable distinctions leaves a doctrine of God vulnerable to the projecting of human relationships or love into the Godhead, albeit it on a divine scale, or accepting some form of modalism. It can also leave the impression that this divine community is a divine ideal that cannot be understood, much less related to human relationships. If the immanent Trinity is such a mystery, the doctrine has truly been rendered irrelevant. Moltmann and Forsyth saw this in the obscuring effect metaphysical theology had on the church. For Moltmann, this was the error of Augustine who focused so much on the unity of God that, though he maintained that there were distinctions, they did not seem to be meaningful.

5. The Bible is focused on the Trinity in the economy, and there should be some caution in referring to conversations among the divine Persons in the immanent Trinity. Both Moltmann and Forsyth have a better understanding of this that focuses on the perichoretic unity

of love in the Trinity. There is an aligning of wills, but there is no delay in it.

6. The soteriological implications of one's Trinitarian theology must always be considered. If there is no eternal obedience of the Son, from where does the obedience come? If obedience is human, is the cross the exclusive act of God?

7. If metaphysical categories are to be adopted, there needs to be a distinction between relational and essential terms. This was the Arian error. As the Cappadocians taught, Father is a relation and neither an essence or an action. Subordination in the sense of obedience is a relational term.

The concern for a biblical understanding of manhood and womanhood should not be disregarded, and the doctrine of the Trinity has relevancy here. The renewed interest among North American evangelicals in the Trinity because of this concern is welcomed. However, perhaps, there would be greater benefit if the emphasis were first on the doctrine of the Trinity itself and its relevancy to the church and God's kingdom. Then by entering into the larger theological discussion, their voices would stand to benefit the rest of the church. They might also gain valuable insights that will help them more effectively address their concerns.

### **TRINITY IN THE PEWS**

The modern struggle with accepting the biblical understanding of the Son as equal to the Father and eternally obedient to the Father appears to stem less from a look at the scriptural evidence and more at the oppression seen in human authoritarian structures. If the church is to be the church of Jesus Christ, it must stand against this oppression wherever and however it appears. In this Moltmann is correct and it would behoove the church to heed his call. However, he goes too far when he equates authority with oppression. This certainly contradicts the biblical

presentation of divine authority and divinely granted human authority, and it is yet to be proved that all historical authority has resulted in oppression. This focus on the elimination of authority misses the sin problem that is more than systemic. Eliminating the system of authority or replacing it with a different one accomplishes little if sin on the individual level remains. By maintaining the authority of God as recorded in the Bible, one can see the conditions under which authority is not abusive but empowering for the ones in authority and the ones obeying. The Bible presents the necessary spiritual condition as perfect divine love.

This is one way to address the British Council of Churches' concern to bring the Trinity back to the pews. How can the doctrine of the Trinity be relevant in the life of Christians and the church? Forsyth knew the metaphysical explanations upon which the church had relied prevented the doctrine from being accessible to most people. The formulas had doxological value, but "God in Three Persons" and similar phrasings do not communicate much at all about who God is and the relevance that his identity has for us. One of Augustine's intentions in expounding the concept of the vestiges of the Trinity was to help the doctrine to be understandable. One of his main analogies focused on love in which the Father is the one who loves, the Son is the one who is loved, and the Spirit is the power of the love. While this analogy has deficiencies, taken with the conclusions of this study, it might provide one way of helping the doctrine of the Trinity be more relevant in the life of the church.

Appeals to the concept of love are not intended to make the doctrine of the Trinity more understandable. Love, after all, is itself difficult to understand. Rather, it provides a bridge between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, because love has its source in God and must be expressed if it is love. If love is seen as the basis of the unity and diversity in the Trinity, there are obvious parallels that this would have for human relationships. This love is the expression of faith in

Jesus Christ according to Scripture, but the expression of this love can be diverse. By keeping love in the context of the Holy Trinity, it is holy love, as Forsyth would say, superior to all other types of love. In addition, since we are not God, his expressions of his love will not necessarily be identical to our expressions. But because of the incarnation, we know that when the Holy Spirit dwells in us we can love as Jesus loved.

Hilary saw John 17:21 as one of the most direct biblical statements regarding a connection between the intra-Trinitarian relationship of the Father and the Son and human relationships. "... that they may all be one, just as you and I are one, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." This prayer of Jesus brings together in a few words the wonder and power of the relationship of the Father and the Son. In these verses, there is the distinction, the sending by the Father and the obedience of the Son, and the unity of Father and Son described as mutual indwelling. But there is also the invitation to experience this unity among ourselves and even in the divine community. The living out of this holy love in the community of faith, and the community living out this holy love in the world is the evidence that the world needs so that the world might believe in Jesus Christ. The role of the church is to love as the divine Persons love so that the world will look to Jesus. This prayer of Jesus is the prayer for a unity that participates in the divine Triunity and, therefore, is founded in the community of divine love. It is the prayer of promise and the prayer of hope.

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